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**Dub poetry  
a study beyond predefined interpretations**

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# **Dub poetry:**

## **A study beyond predefined interpretations**

by Rachel Bolle – Debessay

under the supervision of Paul Gilroy

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy – Arts and Humanities – English Literature  
King's College University, London 2019

# **Abstract**

This dissertation examines key artistic characteristics that have made dub poetry an innovative form. Whereas previous criticism of dub poetry has offered almost exclusively sociological readings, this work thoroughly analyses its constitutive cultural elements through an aesthetic lens. In so doing, this dissertation fills a void in the understanding of the form's aesthetic. Indeed, in current scholarship there is no academic study that takes the aesthetic of this poetic style as its main area of investigation. This work is an inquiry into the substance of dub poetry. It is an analysis of the form and the artistic choices that characterise the style of this particular poetic tradition.

In response to scholars who have taken a worldwide view to discuss dub poetry as a general phenomenon of the Caribbean literary tradition, this work offers a new angle of analysis by focusing on its development in the local context of London. Staying within a delimited space, I analyse poetic choices in relation to the specificities of the cultural context that surrounded the development of dub poetry. However, this new angle of analysis is not used to confine the poetry within the boundaries of a single place of belonging. Instead, whereas previous criticism used national interpretations to discuss the poetry as a product of Jamaican culture, I am interested in how the global context of transnational and diasporic circulations gets reworked at ground level through processes of local recycling. I thus pinpoint London as a place where a diasporic framework was forged by transnational dialogues produced by a Caribbean diasporic community

shaped by the specificities of a local context. Focusing on the work of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Michael Smith, I therefore concentrate on the poetry's early years, namely the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In chapter 1, I introduce dub poetry with a brief history of the form and its criticism. This chapter reconsiders the relationship between the words 'dub' and 'poetry' in order to open doors to new understandings of this poetic style. In chapter 2, I place the poetry within a historical trajectory marked by transnational dialogues. This chapter analyses the cultural context that paved the way for dub poetry's emergence. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical basis for the construction of the complex webs of intertextuality and interperformativity in which I situate this study. These webs offer new frames for the interpretation of unexplored dimensions of dub's poetics in relation to a mix of artistic practices. The last three chapters offer close readings of selected poems. Chapter 4 investigates LKJ's use of rhythm in 'Five Nights of Bleeding (For Leroy Harris)' (1974), challenging the idea of a poetic rhythm standardised on and predefined by the rhythm of reggae music. In chapter 5, I use LKJ's 'Street 66' (1975) to analyse the impact of music, and more particularly reggae and the low frequencies of its bass, on the development of poetic expression. Finally, chapter 6 examines Michael Smith's 'Trainer' (1982). Rather than taking dub poetry's performative aspect as a pre-given element of a race-based reading, this chapter demonstrates the unexplored influence of theatre on the practice of dub poetry.

The innovative methodology of the close readings offers new analytical perspectives. Dub poetry has a particular ability to present poems in different formats. A poem can be performed live or studio-recorded, with or without music.

It can also appear without the performance, in a print version. This variety of forms makes the establishment of an adequate interpretative framework a difficult task, as not only the specificities of each version but also the relationships amongst versions must be analysed within a coherent interpretative system. This complexity has created a void in academic studies of dub poetry. No scholar has yet offered a convincing understanding of these different versions through a coherent and innovative investigation of their poetics. There is no study that uses the different versions of a poem as solid ground on which to unpack the poetics of dub poetry. This thesis is therefore the first to organise its approach upon the recognition of these different versions. It understands key characteristics of dub poetry as consequences of the fruitful dialogue created by the multiple presences of a poem. As different versions are held together, they shed new light on the aesthetics of dub poetry. In this work, performance is a crucial site of analysis, which uses it to help develop a comprehensive study that focuses specifically on the artistic choices of this poetic tradition. Each poem presents key characteristics often considered defining elements, and each chapter offers a close analysis of these characteristics, as they remain largely underanalysed. A comprehensive study of how they operate within this tradition is long overdue.

Finally, because a poem can be performed over three or even four decades, time brings a series of transformations that affect the realisations of a poem either in the same format or in different modes of presentation. In this work, time is an important dimension of the methodology, as it is a meaningful element in the making and development of aesthetic choices.

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# Acknowledgements

I thank my friends and family, both in London and in Geneva, who have offered words of encouragement throughout these four years. Although they have often been unaware of the consequences, their curiosity, inquiries, interest, comments, criticism and disagreements have helped me consider the subject of this thesis from a variety of perspectives. They activated the non-academic angle by asking basic yet fundamental questions while looking for simple and clear answers.

A special acknowledgement to M.O. and her partner, who hosted me in London on several occasions, helping me to travel back and forth between Switzerland and the UK. I also thank my colleagues who empathised with my anxieties and gave me enough space and time to focus on my studies.

In particular, I express my sincere gratitude to my mother, who supported me unconditionally at every stage of this long process: your presence has been an incomparable aid; and to my father, who has always accepted my choices without contradiction. His *lacher-prise* helped me to start this project without too much apprehension.

I also thank P.F., who helped to balance these years of study with other emotional and intellectual ‘things’, giving me the necessary fresh air for a healthy academic journey. Your spontaneity and our complicity have been very much appreciated.

A huge thanks to J.F., who meticulously read the entire manuscript, helping me to make the necessary changes for the submission of the dissertation. After

reading some chapters of this work, M.L. offered precious insights into reggae music and culture, from which I am also fortunate to have benefited. As an enthusiastic first reader, you gave me the confidence that I needed to continue and finish.

Because a thesis is never the work of just one person, heartfelt acknowledgements go to all the people who agreed to be interviewed. Your conversations were a great help in keeping my reflections on dub poetry grounded in the reality of your lived experiences. Appreciation also goes to B.W. and A.H., for planting the seed of possibly doing a Ph.D., many years back.

On the academic side, I thank J.M.C., who took on the role of a second supervisor despite an administrative title, and found the time to share critical feedback.

Last but not least, I offer my sincere gratitude to my supervisor P.G., who constantly invited me to dig deeper into unexplored intellectual space, where the limits of expected interpretations break down under the pressure of new analyses. Your genuine interest in the subject of dub poetry has been a precious driving force from the first day we met. The consistency of this intellectual guidance, which generously continued during a sabbatical break, was a good reminder of my fortunate position. Alongside this academic concern, your extended hospitality has been a great help in making our shared neighbourhood a friendly place to live.

As a self-funded student, I would not have been able to complete this work without the financial support of my mother and P.F. I am deeply grateful for your generosity.

# Introduction

This thesis is a journey.<sup>1</sup> It is a metaphorical journey into the poetics of dub poetry, all the way to the heart, where words, music and performance combine. Before now, no study has looked at dub poetry from the angle of its artistic innovations. The poetry's politicised aspect has pushed criticism to focus almost exclusively on the texts: scholars have discussed the power of the words and their various implications in the struggles for social justice from the 1970s onward. Today dub poetry is a precious archive that documents these social fights, as the dub poet functioned as an important reporter who commented on realities of black life shaped by constant racial, but also class, tensions. The work of pioneering poets such as Okuo Onuoara, Mutabaruka, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Lillian Allen, Yasus Afari, Benjamin Zephaniah, Michael Smith and Linton Kwesi Johnson (often called LKJ) is testimony to a writing practice highly engaged with and committed to political activism. It emerged within a Caribbean community where social injustices shaped a consciousness and a militancy expressed in literature, music, visual arts. Dub poetry is written to shake up the minds of its audience. But the focus in the academic context on its political side has resulted in almost exclusively sociological interpretations, and the repetition of such readings has had the perverse

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<sup>1</sup> The critical inspiration of the notion of travel and its influence on the organisation of my work are Edward Said's 'traveling theory' and James Clifford's 'traveling cultures', which further elaborates the metaphor of travel (Edward Said, 'Traveling Theory', in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 226-247; James Clifford, 'Traveling Cultures', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 96-117).

consequence of placing the poetry within fixed categories that continue to freeze interpretative frameworks. This thesis takes a different route. It proposes an alternative journey through an unexplored dimension of dub poetry.

Focusing on the poetics does not mean ignoring the politics. Yet I do want to shift critical attention to the poetry's space of aesthetic innovation. Dub poetry is part of a tradition where politics and aesthetics are in constant dialogue. This discursive space rejects a separation between art and everyday life. Indeed, the boundaries between politics and aesthetics are consciously blurred in the work's artistic development. Responding to this intimate relationship between content and form requires an approach that acknowledges the reciprocity between ethics and aesthetics. My criticism of the aesthetics is therefore a synthesis of these two dimensions:<sup>2</sup> for the purpose of clarity in my analytical discourse, I focus on the aesthetics of the poetics and do not go into sociological interpretations. In this thesis, I address aesthetic choices and their articulation, keeping in mind that content and form—politics and aesthetics—are not separable elements of this art. This journey into poetics requires travel between academic fields: literature, performance, music, cultural studies. Indeed, as dub poetry has the characteristic feature of appearing in different formats, an analysis of this poetic tradition must have an interdisciplinary approach. The 'contact zone' between fields has many exciting doors leading to interdisciplinary interpretations with new analytical vocabularies that can respond to the specificities of dub poetry. Travelling

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Vassilis Vitsaxis, 'Forme et Contenu du Poème: Les Adversaires Collaborateurs', in *Le Poétique: Questions d'Ésthétique* (Paris: L'Harmattan), pp. 9-26, which discusses the reciprocal relationship between form and content, as well as how to approach them as two distinct elements of a poetic product.

between disciplines allows the development of concise, precise and effective modes of analysis. This approach's originality is not in its uses of the whole variety of artistic presentations that characterise the tradition of dub poetry but rather in holding these different versions in productive conversation with one another. It is only looking at them in tandem that can produce an accurate understanding of dub poetry. This methodology is presented in more detail in the following paragraphs.

\*\*\*

This thesis is also the outcome of a journey. It is the result of a physical trip across national boundaries. It started during a vacation in Trinidad, where I was visiting a friend over the summer. We attended a poetry reading where the rhythm of calypso and reggae drove the poet's spoken words. When I Googled his name, I unravelled a web of artists inside and outside the Caribbean connected through a shared practice of poetry, performance and music. In the extended family of performed poetries, dub poetry is a popular and well-established style. My introduction to it came with a particular narrative based on fixed categories. Taking the poet's own voice as authoritative, descriptions of this poetry go back to Onuora's words: 'When you speak about dub, you speak about Jamaica, dub poetry is a unique Jamaican thing'.<sup>3</sup> Yet the intertextuality and interperformativity of the different styles of performed poetries in the web I had discovered complexified my reception of dub poetry. I started to question its restricted

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Habekost, *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), p. 5. Original quote in Onuora Adugo, 'Dub Poetry: An Examination of the Origins, Construct and Development of a Unique Jamaican Indigenous Art' (bachelor's thesis, Kingston, 1986).

national identity: I was puzzled by the recurrent understanding of this poetry as intrinsically Jamaican while it showed profound similarities with artistic works outside this ascribed space.

A few months later I was visiting a cousin in Paris, with whom I attended a concert by the Last Poets, a group of poets and musicians from the Black Power era and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Once again, I was surprised by artistic similarities between their work, the performance of the Trinidadian poet whose name I had by now forgotten and the poetry of dub poets that I found on the Internet. The way music and voice combined, the presence of poets and musicians together onstage, the use of poetry to deliver uncompromising political messages and the audience's attentive listening were shared elements creating an intertextual and interperformative space that dismantled national boundaries. The history of dub poetry was clearly connected to this creative space through unexplored routes. It was by tracing these routes and looking for connections outside pre-established narratives that I ended up writing a master's dissertation under the title 'The Black Arts Movement and Dub Poetry: a Cross-over Conversation'. There are many things in it that I would say differently today. Yet the transnational dimension of this cross-over conversation has continued to function as an inspiring space where I can articulate the different aspects of my current research.

Many years passed between that first attempt to trace the complex connections of dub poetry and this work. While selecting poems for a reader-response project that I prepared for high school students, I came across 'To Dub or Not to Dub'— a discussion amongst Kei Miller, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Lorna

Goodison and Lauren Alleyne, chaired by Vladimir Lucien, at the 2014 Bocas Lit Fest in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago—and Miller’s article ‘A Smaller Sound, a Lesser Fury: A Eulogy for Dub Poetry’.<sup>4</sup> Both the talk and the paper discussed this poetry’s ‘birth’ and ‘death’. As Miller writes:

In narrating its birth, however, I may have already begun to hint at some of the reasons dub poetry would eventually die—or if not “die” fully, at least “die down.” Dub poetry was the voice of a revolution and revolutions do not last forever.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the political urgency that prompted the emergence of dub poetry is no longer a reality. Therefore, it is impossible for dub poetry to stay alive. Yet Miller explains that ‘dub poetry will continue to live a sort of life in the diaspora because there will always be nostalgic consumers who want to purchase the product’.<sup>6</sup>

This view is problematic for a number of reasons. The focus on the correlation between the form and the political context in both the birth and the death of this poetic style undermines the emergence of the poetics from a complex web of artistic practices. As said above, this is a common view in dub poetry criticism. Moreover, placing the poetry within a delimited time frame prevents an understanding outside the linearity of conventional modes of interpretation. This thesis interrogates overlapping artistic practices to understand dub poetry’s

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<sup>4</sup> Kei Miller, ‘Bocas Lit Fest 2014: To Dub or Not to Dub’. 26 April 2014. Available at <<https://soundcloud.com/bocaslitfest/to-dub-or-not>> [04 July 2018]; Kei Miller, ‘A Smaller Sound, a Lesser Fury: A Eulogy for Dub Poetry’, *Small Axe Online*, 14 (November 2013) <<http://small-axe.happyviper.com/sxsalon/discussions/smaller-sound-lesser-fury>> [10 November 2014].

<sup>5</sup> Miller, ‘A Smaller Sound, a Lesser Fury: A Eulogy for Dub Poetry.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, ‘A Smaller Sound, a Lesser Fury: A Eulogy for Dub Poetry.

development as an ongoing arc of transformation rather than a story of birth and death. This different temporality is influenced by Raymond Williams's framework for cultural organisation.

In his book *Marxism and Literature*, Williams introduces to the investigation of cultures the notions of the dominant, the residual and the emergent.<sup>7</sup> The dominant phase of a culture is a period characterised by its hegemonic place within society: its system of values and meanings becomes the norm. A dominant culture selects and incorporates meanings and practices from both the past and the present. In this process, certain aspects of the culture are emphasised or excluded, constantly transforming it. In the residual phase, only residues of the previous social formation remain, which are still practiced in the dominant phase of a following culture. These elements can be lived as past norms, in which case they represent past traditions and symbols, or remain as strongly significant as they were in their culture's dominant phase. Finally, the emergent phase is when new meanings, values and practices are created. Again, the dominant culture can either incorporate or reject them. However, both the residual and the emergent are in the margins to some extent, because they have not been recognised by, acknowledged by, or included in the dominant. Some elements of these phases will themselves never have a dominant phase. They are, according to Williams, part of alternative or oppositional cultures, whose characteristic members are, respectively, 'someone who finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it' and 'someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change society'

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Dominant, Residual, and Emergent', in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 121-128.

in its light'.<sup>8</sup> With the back and forth movements inside and outside these porous phases, culture is understood as a combination of multilayered negotiations that, in their overlaps, blur and challenge the distinctive edges of a particular cultural phase. With this in mind, it is clear that dub poetry cannot be reduced to fixed moments of 'life' and 'death' placed on a linear timescale. As time passes, the poetics of dub renegotiate its relationship, but also its position, with regard to the dominant, the emergent and the residual. At times, its position within this organisational schema has undermined and reconfigured the dominant cultural narrative. A critical approach to dub poetry, therefore, needs to question how the poetics creatively overlaps and coexists with these different phases. The close readings of this thesis analyse selected mechanisms for incorporating or rejecting key artistic elements, which thus become characteristic of this poetics. While some selections are conscious, others are not, but in any case they represent artistic innovations which direct my discussion of dub poetry.

Physical travel informed and motivated my selection of theories. Respecting the different journeys that made this work possible, I have anchored this study in diasporic and transnational frameworks. In other words, the organisation, the structure and the shape of my approach are strongly inspired by the transformative effect that travelling between countries has had on me. Although this study's journey reconnects dub poetry to a diasporic and transnational space, it does not have a worldwide perspective. I am not looking at the situations in Jamaica or Canada, where interpretations of dub poetry might go in different

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<sup>8</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', in *Raymond Williams: Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 31-50 (pp. 41-42).

directions. Such a generic stance would inevitably lead to uncritical homogenisation and universalisation of interpretation. I want to avoid the generic analytical discourse of previous criticism by focusing on the coexistence of the local and the global. That said, it is important to remember the transnational structures of circulation and exchanges in dub poetry as fundamental aspects of its emergence. In these complex structures, Jamaica, but also Canada, should not be minimised. I have already discussed Jamaica's role as the dub poetry's motherland. Canada, however, which has also functioned as an important space of production, is too often dismissed when the history of this poetry is rerouted within a diasporic frame. Lillian Allen, Afua Cooper, ahdi zhina mandiela, Clifton Joseph, Chet Singh and d'bi. young, to name just a few—all are established Canadian dub poets, active and important participants in this art form. In 2003, a group of Canadian dub poets started the Dub Poets Collective, which organised three national and two international dub poetry festivals in southern Ontario between 2004 and 2010, testifying to Canada's place as a hub in the production of dub poetry. While noticing this country's general exclusion from discussions of the art form, Phanuel Antwi writes:

We should consider not simply ways dub poetry expands the geographical space of the black Atlantic but also how the black diasporic space of Canada has played a creative role in facilitating the differences we hear among the international sounds of dub poetry.<sup>9</sup>

Although I do not want to overlook Canada's role and place in this cultural

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<sup>9</sup> Phanuel Antwi, 'Dub Poetry as a Black Atlantic Body-Archive', *Small Axe*, 19 (2015), pp. 65-83 (p. 75) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-3341825>> [20 April 2020].

practice, I have consciously restricted my study to a specific area in order to avoid generic and reductive interpretations. In my work, the ‘position of *enunciation*’, to use Stuart Hall’s words, is the UK, and more precisely London.<sup>10</sup> But this focus on a rather circumscribed cultural environment should not confine the poetry within the boundaries of a single site. This would be counterproductive to the overarching aim of de-territorialising it from its ascribed space of belonging and origin. Keeping in mind the presence of these various places in the history of dub poetry, I am interested in how the global context of transnational and diasporic circulations gets reworked at ground level through processes of local recycling. I identify London, shaped by transnational dialogues produced by a Caribbean diasporic community, as a space able to offer the necessary cultural setting for the early experimentation with the style of dub poetry. Because I focus on poetic innovations, I therefore concentrate on London in the poetry’s early years, namely the late 1970s and early 1980s.

I am very aware of the variety of poetic styles in the practice of dub poetry. Differences across the cultural environments surrounding the work of the artists and differences in styles between the poets themselves are elements to keep in mind. A study of dub poetry cannot respond to all of these variants. The delimitation of space by geography but also by time offers the opportunity to reinvent and put into use analytical frameworks connected to the reality of a certain context. This thesis uses the particularities of a cultural context delimited within a specific period as direct inputs to develop a critical approach.

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<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-237 (p. 222).

Because I focus on London, I deliberately centre my investigation on the work of Linton Kwesi Johnson. I stay within his early artistic years, a period that he refers to as characterised by ‘the urgency of expression’.<sup>11</sup> That said, considering the imprint that Michael Smith’s performances have left on the history of dub poetry, particularly in London, I have included one of his works in my selection of poems. As opposed to LKJ, who has lived and worked in London after migrating there from Jamaica, Smith remained in Jamaica. He has spent a considerable amount of time touring across Europe. As he performed at literary festivals, his work radiated out to a large poetic network. He became an influential figure for many writers, including those outside the dub poetry school. His presence in the UK has played a major role in strengthening and nourishing cross-Atlantic connections between poets living and working in the Caribbean and in Europe. Concretely speaking, LKJ and Smith’s numerous collaborations illustrate this transatlantic dialogue. As LKJ remembers:

I’d met him in 1979 when I’d done a couple of shows in 1979 for Peter Tosh [...], one at the Ranny Williams Center in Kingston and one in Hellshire Beach. [...] I was able to invite Michael Smith to England to do a poetry tour and he also performed at the first international book fair for Radical Black and Third World books in 1982. [...] But the year before that in 1981, I happened to be in Barbados fronting a documentary for the BBC called ‘From Brixton to Barbados’ about the Carifesta, the regional arts festival they have every six years or so, and that year it was in Barbados. And Mikey Smith was there in Barbados and

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<sup>11</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson’s ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ - *Ephemeropterae, Lopud*. 2017. Available at <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGR6d\\_hsaKk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGR6d_hsaKk)> [20 December 2017].

Anthony Wall thought it would be a good idea to film him performing his famous poem ‘Mi Cyaan believe it’ which was broadcast on the BBC. So that’s how Mikey got introduced to the British public.<sup>12</sup>

The above quote nicely brings back the notion of travelling between countries that functions as a structural thread in my approach. The performance of dub poetry in different parts of the world has produced artistic connections that have been important in dub poetry’s further development. LKJ’s comments on his relationship with Smith show that it was en route, in a journey across countries, that poets created a space for the emergence of productive and transforming transnational dialogues. These physical and poetic encounters brought the poetry to an international scale, in an outer-national space. The quote also illustrates how their encounter led to Smith’s introduction into the British scene. I use the impact of their collaboration as an opportunity to further investigate the coexistence of local and global.

Despite this dissertation’s different route from that of other criticism, it would not have been possible without previous studies. More specifically, in looking at Afro-Caribbean poetry, culture and music, an early generation of writers and critics, such as Kamau Edward Brathwaite, Mervyn Morris and Stewart Brown, have produced a comprehensive background on which I articulate my own analyses. Scholars such as Kwame Dawes and Lloyd Bradley, whose work

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<sup>12</sup> Joe Lowndes, ‘Linton Kwesi Johnson and Black British Struggle’. Africa is a Country. 26 May 2017. Blog. Available at <<https://africasacountry.com/2017/05/linton-kwesi-johnson-and-black-british-struggle/>> [07 May 2018]. In ‘Remembering Michael Smith’, LKJ notes that he first encountered Smith on a literary level through Melvyn Morris, who introduced him to Smith’s work. It was only later that they met in person in Jamaica (Linton Kwesi Johnson, ‘Remembering Michael Smith (Mikey, Dub and Me)’, in *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Annie Paul (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2007), pp. 152-160 (p. 157).

investigates reggae music in particular, have also played an important role in developing a narrative of music's role and place in poetry. Anthologies of anglophone poetries, and more specifically Afro-Caribbean poetries, compiled by editors such as James Berry, Laurence Breiner, Michael Bucknor, Edward J. Chamberlin, Ian Dieffenthaller, Alison Donnell, Edward Archibald Markham, Pamela Mordecai and Denise deCaires Narain, are cornerstones to build on. In the paucity of academic studies concerned specifically with dub poetry, the work of David Bousquet, Eric Doumerc, Christian Habekost, Bartosz Wójcik and more recently David Austin has advanced interesting debates that I can join. Finally, the overarching framework for the scholarship of this thesis is grounded in studies of cultural movements, displacements and encounters. Pioneering figures such as Édouard Glissant, James Clifford and Edward Said have formulated comprehensive approaches to the cultural dynamism of exchange, formation, transformation. Paul Gilroy's black Atlantic is a fundamental concept used to place dub poetry in a complex web of intertextuality and interperformativity. It allows the investigation of diasporic and transnational networks, which create reactive moments of inventiveness. These writers have strongly influenced this work's interpretations of culture based on the notions of plurality, syncretism, creolisation, hybridisation and flexibility, which have long been noted as defining characteristics of Caribbean aesthetics.

Alongside these scholarly publications, a series of interviews with people differently engaged with dub poetry punctuate this work. They are poets, musicians, DJs, critics, enthusiastic listeners, observers, consumers of dub poetry. They are the voices of the everyday that offer insightful comments on its poetics,

as well as the political and cultural environment surrounding its emergence. The interviewees' different relationships to the poetry have brought into my research a variety of voices that are too often ignored or unheard in an academic world largely uninterested in dub poetry. These interviews add necessary fragments to the construction of a critical view. They confirm, challenge, transform, contrast with or nuance pre-established interpretations and meanings proposed by academic studies. Interviews have allowed me to pay more attention to hidden and unexplored dimensions of 'official' criticism. In my journey into the poetics of dub, they paved new routes outside normative narratives. Some interviews were planned because I associated their subjects with the history of dub poetry. Others were the result of random encounters at cultural events such as exhibitions, talks, readings, gatherings, concerts. The year 2016 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Caribbean Artists Movement. The George Padmore Institute in Finsbury Park, London, played an important role in remembering the time of the CAM's birth as a culturally dense moment when the local and the global interacted to produce creative dialogues. Dub poetry benefited considerably from that cultural environment. The institute, which has been an important cultural hub of black writing and thinking from its founding in 1991, organised different commemorative events, where I met people who expanded my understanding of the relationship between the local and the global to include subtle aspects that tend to be marginalised and underestimated. Moreover, because I first encountered dub poetry in person, I wanted to keep a foot outside the books. In other words, I wanted to learn and engage with its history through approaches other than reading. In an academic context, where scholars' voices are often the

loudest, these interviews functioned as great opportunities to find critical inspiration ‘outside the book’.

That said, it is important to emphasise that I do not regard these interviews as unconditional truth. Instead, I use them to bring back a variety of voices that agree, disagree, converge or contrast with one another and my own criticism. It was often the case that my academic understanding of dub poetry prompted dissenting comments. As said above, the motivation behind this work is to offer the possibility to fully appreciate the creativity that cultural movements and exchanges have produced. At times, the dismantling of national boundaries within this criticism was confronted by more conventional interpretations based on elements that powerfully reinforce a pre-given Jamaican narrative. Williams’s dominant, emergent and residual phases illustrate how cultural elements are selected, applauded and emphasised but also rejected, hidden or unnoticed. The interviews were reminders of these complex mechanisms in both the production and the reception of this poetic tradition, translated into the vocabulary of ordinary conversations.

In chapter 1, I introduce dub poetry with a brief history of the form and its criticism. This chapter reconsiders the relationship between the words ‘dub’ and ‘poetry’ in order to open new doors to new understandings of this poetic style. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical basis for the construction of complex webs of intertextuality and interperformativity on which I place my study of dub poetry. These webs offer new frames for the interpretation of unexplored dimensions of dub’s poetics in relation to an amalgam of artistic practices. In chapter 3, with these intertextual and interperformative webs in mind, I place the poetry within a

historical trajectory marked by transnational dialogues. This chapter analyses the cultural context that paved the way for dub poetry's emergence. The last three chapters are close readings of selected poems, each focusing on a key characteristic of the poetry. Chapter 4 investigates LKJ's use of rhythm in 'Five Nights of Bleeding (For Leroy Harris)' (1974), challenging the idea of a poetic rhythm standardised on and predefined by the rhythm of reggae music. This close reading shows how a careful manipulation of the relationship between words and music produces a variety of changes in the poem's rhythmic texture. In chapter 5, I use LKJ's 'Street 66' (1975) to analyse the impact of music, and more particularly reggae and the low frequencies of its bass, on the development of poetic expression. Finally, chapter 6 examines Michael Smith's 'Trainer' (1982). Rather than taking dub poetry's performative aspect as a pre-given element of a race-based reading, this chapter demonstrates the unexplored influence of theatre on the practice of dub poetry.

## **Notes on method**

Dub poetry has a particular ability to present poems in different formats. A poem can be performed live or studio-recorded, with or without music. It can also appear without the performance, in a print version. These are constitutive artistic elements in the practice of dub poets. This variety of forms makes the establishment of an adequate interpretative framework a difficult task, as not only the specificities of each version but also the relationships amongst versions must be analysed within a coherent interpretative system. This complexity has created a void in academic studies of dub poetry. No scholar has yet proposed an analysis that offers a convincing understanding of these different versions through a coherent and innovative outlook on their poetics. There is no study that uses the different versions of a poem as solid ground on which to unpack the poetics of dub poetry. This thesis organises its approach from the recognition of these different versions. It understands key characteristics of dub poetry as consequences of the fruitful dialogue created by the multiple presences of a poem. As different versions are held together, they shed new light on the aesthetics of dub poetry.

My methodology, focusing on the interplay of live performances, texts and studio recordings, is carefully designed to respond to the variety of artistic representation in the practice of the dub poet. It is also developed for investigating the evolution of the work in the light of what Leroi Jones, aka Amiri Baraka, calls ‘the changing same’. He introduced this in his often-cited 1966 essay ‘The Changing Same: R&B and New Black Music’, in which he compares different black

musical styles, arguing for an unchanged essence amongst these varieties of musical expression. Without overlooking the differences, Baraka creates a continuum based on the notion of the changing same in order to recognise similarities between distinct styles. The changing same, in other words, is a concept used to recognise cultural mutability within a common framework. As the essay summarises, ‘The New Black Music and R&B are the same family looking at different things. Or looking at things differently.’<sup>13</sup>

By offering a study of dub poetry articulated around different versions of the same poem, my methodology is a counterpoint to this idea of the changing same, looking both ‘at different things’ and ‘at things differently’. I have already mentioned that the presence of different versions is an integral aspect of the dub poet’s artistic practice. I thus understand the practice of dub poetry as a synthesis of text, studio recording and performance. Behind the poem as text, the poem as live performance with and without music and the poem as studio recording lie a number of artistic choices that, taken as a whole, shape the aesthetic of dub poetry. To understand dub poetry in its totality, I examine the characteristics of each type of performance and see how they create a coherent system when put together. Because the presence of these different versions changes the audience’s relationship with the poetic work, the selected versions are used as sites to explore unnoticed areas of investigation and unnoticed aspects of the poetics. Indeed, as the close readings in part 2 will demonstrate, the reception of these versions can be influenced and transformed by the encounter with other artistic

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<sup>13</sup> Jones Leroi, ‘The Changing Same (R&B and the New Black Music)’, in *Black Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), pp. 180-211 (p. 211).

forms of the same poem. It is important that criticism of dub poetry resist easy interpretation, including overgeneralising comments that flatten the specificities of these different versions. It is equally fundamental to establish a continuum encompassing all the iterations of a single poem. The methodology proposed here does these two things and looks at different versions of the same poem from the angle of Baraka's system of cultural evolution expounded through the concept of the changing same.

It is important to emphasise that the different versions of a single poem are often separated by long periods of time. Stylistic variations are therefore not simply the result of different poetic mediums, different modes of representation. The passage of time that accompanies the realisation of these versions also plays an important role in the work's evolution, discussed here from the perspective of the changing same. This study of dub poetry, therefore, includes time in its methodology and shows how it impacts the development of the poems under scrutiny. In LKJ's case, the absence of new material since the 1990s has influenced and shaped the development of his live performances, making the discussion of his work's evolution particularly complex.<sup>14</sup>

In this study, performance is a key to dub poetry that enables me to propose a new organisation of dub poetry's material. Yet the use of performance as means and subject demands an innovative form of criticism. Carol Bailey is insightful here: 'A shift in focus to the performativity of these works makes exploration of the aesthetic features of such performance intrinsic to any basic reading of them,

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<sup>14</sup> His latest publications are selections of previous poems. His latest recordings are similarly compilations of already recorded and remixed songs.

and therefore an incorporation of some of the critical approaches and tools of performance studies is especially useful'.<sup>15</sup> Although her comment is about her discussion of performance in contemporary Caribbean fiction, it nonetheless shows the necessity of finding inspiration in performance studies for the development of more adapted forms of criticism. The close readings offer new perspectives on the development of the poetics of dub. To hold the different versions together, but also to put them into dialogue, requires some careful preparation, which the following paragraphs aim to provide. The task is threefold. First, in order to fully appreciate the implications of the use of performance in close readings, some preliminary comments on the term 'performance' itself are necessary. I therefore present here selected conceptualisations that have influenced my approach and my understanding of the relationships amongst the different versions of a dub poem. Indeed, the concept of performance is used across a wide variety of fields that do not enter the scope of the following close readings. The elusiveness of the term can have a counterproductive effect by encouraging the elaboration of unspecific frameworks. Second, this section provides a short overview of previous discussions about the performed dimension of dub poems. It is important to remember these, as they nourished my own thinking. I built on, departed from and otherwise responded to common conceptions around the presence of performance in dub poetry. Finally, continuing with the general concern, which is to prepare the ground for the close readings, I provide further explanations and comments on the chosen

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<sup>15</sup> Carol Bailey, *A Poetics of Performance: The Oral-Scribal Aesthetic in Anglophone Caribbean Fiction* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2014), p. 14.

methodology.

## Adapting the term ‘performance’

In *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Marvin Carlson notes:

The term “performance” has become extremely popular in recent years in a wide range of activities in the arts, in literature, and in the social sciences. As its popularity and usage has grown, so has a complex body of writing about performance, attempting to analyze and understand just what sort of human activity it is.<sup>16</sup>

Richard Schechner, in his book offering a general introduction to performance, makes similar remarks. The chapter ‘What Is Performance Studies’ notes the same complexity:

Performances occur in many different instances and kinds. Performance must be construed as a “broad spectrum” or “continuum” of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet.<sup>17</sup>

Navigating between authors, scholars, critics and artists, Schechner’s book proposes a wide range of contexts in which to understand performance, in order to avoid narrowing the idea down into reductive categories. The book also looks at the variety of approaches found in performance studies: critics as well as artists,

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<sup>16</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

creators, performers or interpreters may understand performance in everyday living contexts or from a text-oriented perspective. Moreover, performance can be seen as a self-sufficient entity. In such cases it is analysed as an independent phenomenon, without taking into consideration elements outside the work. The work speaks for itself. Other interpretations prefer to use the relationship between the performance and people involved in the event, as either receivers or producers, to build a more reciprocity-oriented framework. In light of this complexity, any attempt to enclose the notion of performance within a single perspective runs the risk of undervaluing its contribution to and input in the development of new criticism and new modes of investigation. Making performance a useful analytical category entails the difficult task of narrowing the term down so that it responds to the specificities of the close readings while keeping in mind its complexity and corresponding role in the development of innovative forms of criticism. As already mentioned, a particularity of dub poetry is its different types of performance. Moving between a live and a studio-recorded version, for instance, raises questions about the nature of performance, including what is and is not considered a performance. Peggy Phelan, in her book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, argues that a true performance cannot be saved, recorded or documented or participate in the circulation of representations of representations. ‘Once it does so’, she explains, ‘it becomes something other than performance’.<sup>18</sup> A recorded performance, therefore, cannot be considered a ‘real’ performance, because the only ‘life’ of a performance is in the moment of the

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<sup>18</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

performance, in the liveness of the event. Phelan's argument stresses the intransmissibility of recorded events and points to the idea that in order to be considered a performance, an event must be connected to an immediate time and place. Consequently, criticism of dub poetry's performance needs to be connected to the critic's attendance of a live event. This position, understanding a 'real' performance as happening only within the limits of a live event, raises a number of questions on the status of mediatised events. Indeed, following Phelan, a recorded performance is not only secondary but also a type of artificial reproduction of the real. Placed within the tradition of dub poetry, this view affronts issues around the authoritative status of the different performances generated by the circulation of a dub poem. Rather than relying on such an exclusive relationship, I prefer to use a discursive connection that gives equal status to all the varieties of performance. Although the notion of the real is problematic when brought to bear on the dichotomy between live and recorded performance, it nonetheless inspires me to question the different statuses of the various presentations of a dub poem. It pushes me to engage more critically with the realities of their relationships.

## **Previous approaches**

Past studies of dub poetry analyse performance mainly through the prism of oral versus written traditions. In this view, dub poetry is a combination of the two, with both European and African influences. Performance is seen as the manifestation of the oral tradition and is often understood in the linearity of African influences. The printed version, on the other hand, is part of a written tradition. The reading

of an oral performance through the lens of African authenticity is not exclusive to dub poetry. There is a continuous and shared assumption that oral performance reflects a certain authenticity:

In Africanist literary criticism, romanticism still surrounds the notion of ‘orality’. Even in post-colonial critical discourses informed by a destabilising irony, ‘orality’ sometimes remains the last unexamined, essentialist concept, projected as an imagined antithesis of writing. [...] It is treated as both a source – the origin and precursor of ‘modern’ literature – and a resource – a rich heritage or fund of themes, motifs, images, and techniques upon which the ‘modern’ author can draw.<sup>19</sup>

In order to reconcile these two traditions, and therefore the different versions of a dub poem, critics have used a variety of approaches, with oppositional and inclusive perspectives. Christian Habekost’s early study, for instance, displays an understanding of the performance from an oppositional point of view. For him, the performance has a higher artistic value than the text. He explains that although ‘dub poetry can stand the test of formal literary analysis at all possible levels of the text’, a thorough description of the oral ‘is fundamental to an appropriate understanding and evaluation of a given text’.<sup>20</sup> The attention given to the performance naively dismisses the presence of other versions, such as those in books or studio recordings:

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<sup>19</sup> Karin Barber, ‘Literacy, Improvisation and the Public in Yorùbá Popular Theatre’, in *The Pressures of the Text: Orality, Texts and the Telling of Tales*, ed. Stewart Brown (Birmingham: Birmingham University African Studies Serie, 1995), pp. 6-27 (p. 6).

<sup>20</sup> Habekost, p. 7.

Their [dub poets'] performance is perfect – the poems are almost always recited freely without manuscript or book, and the sound of the voice, together with the outward appearance, give the performance the true and forceful power, something hardly ever found at a poetry reading in Western society.<sup>21</sup>

Behind Habekost's admiration for the poem on stage is a romantic idea that the live performance is a result of a practice outside the writing-oriented and bourgeois norms of Western traditions. It is hence received as an anti-establishment expression, which resonates with Habekost's devotion to the revolutionary side of dub poetry. This has undeniable effects on his evaluation of the other versions. Artistic innovations in other formats are simply overshadowed by his admiration for the live event. Coming from an oral tradition, this liveness is seen as an authentic mark of African roots and an alternative to Western literatures. To echo Phelan's vocabulary, this live performance is the real. It is the true essence of a dub poem.

This dichotomy is also known as 'the Great Divide'. Reaching a peak in the 1960s, this old debate stipulates an essentialist distinction between oral and written cultures.<sup>22</sup> As already mentioned, such an opposition prevents any fruitful consideration of the creation of new poetic modes of presentation.<sup>23</sup> Responding to this unproductive situation, scholars have used the notion of a continuum to discuss the relationship between oral and written cultures. While a performed

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<sup>21</sup> Habekost, p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> For bibliographic examples of this debate, see Cyril Vettorato, *Poésie Moderne et Oralité dans les Amériques Noires: «Diaspora de Voix»* (Paris: Classique Garnier, 2017), p. 277.

<sup>23</sup> For a summary of this debate and its effect on studies of performance poetry, see Julia Novak, *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 15-33.

poem presents the oral dimension of dub poetry, there is also a preceding written text behind the here and now of the performance. As Ruth Finnegan explains, an oral poem is ‘a performed literary realization that exists beyond the temporal moment’ of the performance. This perspective avoids a consideration of dub poetry as a purely oral form or, conversely, a purely written form. In such a continuum, there is a place for the ‘text within the performance’.<sup>24</sup>

Although the use of a continuum opens a space for a more inclusive relationship between the text and the performance, this view remains problematic for this study. As already mentioned, the different versions are approached as fragments within a more global poetic practice identified as dub poetry. The versions all have their own particularities that, when held together, create a globality in which the poetics of dub can be unpacked. The different versions of a dub poem function as separate entities that wrestle with differing requirements, but it is in their dialogue that the poetics of dub emerge. Moreover, even the recognition of the text within the performed version shows an understanding of performance that, as Denise deCaires Narain notes, still operates in the rather traditional mode of analysis, in which critical reception is deeply embedded in institutions centred on the printed word: the performance is considered as the spoken realisation of a previously written text. Looking at the scribal and the oral in opposition or, conversely, in a continuum, where the boundaries between versions are dissolved, runs the risk of underestimating the role that their dialogue played in the emergence of dub poetry. The following close readings show how the

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<sup>24</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 175.

performance and the written text creatively interact to bring about poetic innovation. The development of analytical criteria that can encompass all of these specificities without losing sight of the global poetic structure in which they are embedded remains a challenge that critics need to address.

Adding to this difficult task, current analyses of performance also fail to take into consideration the chronological development of a dub poem, as well as the cultural and economic realities that influence its transformation into different versions. It is important to remember that most of LKJ's poems were first published, then played with a backing tape before being performed with a full band, then released on record. Moreover, as it will be further discussed in chapter 2, dub poetry appeared at a time when the popularity of artistic work experimenting with the combination of theatre, music, poetry and visual art was high.<sup>25</sup> Juha Virtanen's book *Poetry and Performance during the British Poetry Revival, 1960-1980* is an insightful overview of this cultural scene. It presents a number of key events that hosted poetry performances: happenings that promoted collaboration between audience and performers in order to make possible the incorporation of performance techniques in poetry readings. Virtanen's interview with the artist Allen Fisher is a testimony to this vibrant cultural scene, in which poetry was presented with performances:

By 1964, Better Books was getting really interesting in central London, just off Charing Cross Road [...] [A] big basement with a lot of installation art,

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<sup>25</sup> In chapter 2, my discussion of the Caribbean Artists Movement shows how performance was seen as an alternative to and a re-evaluation of writing, which enjoyed elite status in European canons. The vibrant performing scene within the CAM is one example of the exploration of mixing poetry with other performing arts at this creative time.

eventually, but a lot of performances [...] which included film. Around that time the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts] set up in Dover Street [...] was very vibrant. For instance, I remember a notable exhibition called Between Poetry and Painting. It showed a relation between concrete poetry and visual poetry, and spoken poetry as well. [...] There were events at the Roundhouse, and there was the London Musicians Collective, and the London Film Co-op, which were in the same building. We would use it for poetry performances. All of this is going on at the same time, more or less, and the pubs were also [...] socially linked to it.<sup>26</sup>

The 1960s and 1970s were also important because they saw the emergence and flowering of the British counterculture, which questioned existing cultural hierarchies. People sought profound change in cultural hierarchies as well as alternative forms of expression, away from the ‘good’ and high culture of the middle and upper classes. Performances that intersected with and mixed poetry, music and theatre were considered potential agents of cultural transformation. They promoted what Andrew Wilson calls ‘a poetics of dissent’.<sup>27</sup> Although the British poetry performance scene was locally based, these poetics of dissent had an international outlook with transnational connections, as many artists wanted to conceptualise ‘their own poetics and poetic identity in relation to like-minded

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<sup>26</sup>Juha Virtanen, *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960-1980: Event and Effect* (Canterbury: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 6. Virtanen interviewed Fisher in 2009 and 2010. A full transcript is available in chapter 7 of Virtanen’s book.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Wilson, ‘A Poetics of Dissent: Notes on a Developing Counterculture in London in the Early Sixties’, in *Art and the 60s: This Was Tomorrow*, ed. Chris Stephens and Katharine Stout (London: Tate Publishing, 2004) quoted in Cornelia Gräbner, ‘Poetry and Performance: The Mersery Poets, the International Poetry Incarnation and Performance Poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, ed. Edward Larrissy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 68-81 (p. 68).

individuals and communities in other parts of the Western world'.<sup>28</sup> Despite the fact that this particular cultural context provided a fertile ground for the exploration of dub poetry in performance, it is often overlooked.

Likewise, the economic situation surrounding the use of performance is another aspect that needs to be mentioned and deserves more study. Indeed, the conversion of a print poem into a performance is often done at least partly for economic reasons. As opposed to a poem on the page, read by a single individual, the live performance of a poem in front of an audience reaches all the people gathered for this event. Similarly, a studio recording of a poem is another efficient means of bringing the work to a wide audience. Performances of poetry, whether live or studio recorded, become strategic tools to increase the poet's visibility and popularity. A breakthrough onto the musical scene offered LKJ economic opportunities:

The music is basically there as a vehicle to take the poetry to audiences who would probably not be otherwise interested in poetry. It's a way of winning people over.<sup>29</sup>

In the same light, he continues,

When the record came out my audience, of course, increased dramatically, because a lot of people who wouldn't have bothered to maybe come to a poetry reading, or even buy a book, were attracted to the music. And I rationalised it by saying that with these records at least I am trying to reach a

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<sup>28</sup> Gräbner, p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> David Bousquet, 'Dub Poetry: Une Étude de l'Oralittérature dans les Poèmes de Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Linton Kwesi Johnson et Benjamin Zephaniah' (doctoral thesis, Université de Strasbourg, 2010), p. 97.

wider audience, trying to bring poetry to a music audience. But I suppose one is fooling oneself with that because, at the end of the day, most people who buy records buy them for the music rather than the poetry.<sup>30</sup>

Performance thus becomes a site of economic survival.<sup>31</sup> In each version—those of the book, the live stage and the recording studio—the performance of a dub poem responds to a desire, but also a need, to turn poetry into a commodity. With these different modes of presentation at hand, the poet can use the poem as a product to generate money for a living. It becomes a marketable package, with the audience playing the role of paying consumers. This process of commercialisation has not been without controversies and tensions. As the poet uses the capitalist space that selling art produces, critics have argued that the poetry's protest dimension, too often the only feature taken to define this artistic tradition, is compromised by the needs of marketing. Stewart Brown's comments point to this effect:

As dub poetry becomes a commercial product, as its performers [...] become media Stars and strive to entertain a mass, multi-cultural audience, there seems to me to be a real danger that the protest, the anger, the fire, becomes

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<sup>30</sup> Burt Caesar, 'Interview: Linton Kwesi Johnson Talks to Burt Caesar at Sparkside Studios, Brixton, London, 11 June 1996', *Critical Quarterly*, 38 (1996), pp. 64-77 (p. 67) <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1996.tb02264.x/pdf>> [18 December 2015].

<sup>31</sup> On 26 April 2018, LKJ discussed this point in a conversation with Paul Gilroy (Linton Kwesi Johnson, Paul Gilroy, and Louisa Layne, 'Great Writers Inspire at Home: Reading Bass Culture'. Oxford Faculty of English Language and Literature. 26 April 2018. Available at <<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/reading-bass-culture>> [22 May 2019]).

an act, while the image, the dub/rant/chant/dance becomes the real substance of the performance.<sup>32</sup>

In such a view, performance affects dub poetry's political mission, challenging its *raison d'être*. The commodification of a performed dub poem is thus thought to promote passivity and negate political engagement. But although the commercialisation of art can undeniably influence its political dimension, this view dismisses the fact that performance is also an act of adaptation to a challenging economic situation. It can be used as a way to work for economic survival.

Finally, the concept of versioning is another important element to keep in mind when thinking about the poem in different forms and their consequences for the use of performance. The recycling and transforming of an original song's material produce the fundamental dynamism in the creation of a dub version. Dub's cultural tradition is based on the presence of different dub versions. This gave rise to a system where these different versions of an original song respond to one another with references and quotes. As the practice around the instrumental version continued to develop, the noun 'version' extended into a verb referring to something more than simply transforming an original into a new product. In Jamaican musical terminology, as Veal explains, 'versioning' is

a method of serially recycling recorded material developed by producers desiring to ensure the longest commercial life for a given piece of recorded music despite economic constraints and a limited pool of musicians.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Stewart Brown, 'Dub Poetry: Selling Out', *Poetry Wales*, 22 (1987), pp. 51–54 (p. 54), quoted in Denise deCaires Narain, *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry : Making Style* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 97.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), p. 55.

This concept brings back the reality of the different types of performance that the dub tradition created, which extended the artists' economic opportunities. In dub poetry, the transformation of a written poem into a variety of performances can be understood as a response to the musical practice of versioning. The poem is recycled and transformed into different formats, for both cultural and economic reasons. As mentioned earlier, my methodology is inspired by the concept of the changing same, as well as the practice of versioning, as a frame of interpretation for analysing the recycling and transformation of a dub poem.

The recognition of these dimensions in the presentation of a dub poem in different formats is a reminder of performance's multiple facets and the concomitant necessity to consider it from different angles. The presence of performance in dub poetry has multilayered influences that must be understood within a wide web of artistic, cultural, historical and economic specificities. Because it cannot consider every thread of this web, this thesis focuses on the elements that constitute the materiality of performance, using a descriptive mode that contributes to the overarching scope of this thesis, which is to propose a new study of dub poetry's aesthetic. Without ignoring the complexity of the above introduction, performance is thus used as a site of analysis to shed new light on artistic choices that characterise the practice of dub poetry.

### **Further remarks**

In order to further guide the reader in the articulation and analysis of a poem's different versions, some comments on my chosen methodology are necessary. These clarifications will facilitate the passages between versions.

The creative process behind a poem varies greatly and depends on the poet. Mervyn Morris's comment on Michael Smith, for instance, testifies to a process that is affiliated more to an oral than a written realisation of the poem:

His skills were essentially oral. When he showed me some of his poems in manuscript he clearly had little notion how he might effectively translate into this other medium the poems that had clearly worked in oral presentation.<sup>34</sup>

In LKJ's practice, however, the poems are written first. His creative impulse is closely linked to a literary tradition.<sup>35</sup> These different ways of composing function as reminders to approach each version as having equal authority. Each poem needs to be analysed from a horizontal, rather than vertical, perspective. They are artistic fragments that together constitute this poetic tradition, forming a totality. Each fragment offers new area of investigation. Moreover, dub poems display a variety of expressive styles, which makes generic observations often contradictory and unproductive. As David Kennedy and Keith Tuma note, 'The problem with defining performance or poetry in performance or the poetry reading itself is that we are not talking about one kind of activity, practice, or institution'.<sup>36</sup>

Given its wide range of expressive styles, the performances selected for the following close readings do not provide an exhaustive picture of what dub poetry sounds and looks like. Nonetheless, each presents key characteristics often considered defining elements, and each chapter offers a close analysis of these

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<sup>34</sup> Mervyn Morris, "Is English we Speaking" and Other Essays (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999), p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, Gilroy, and Layne, 'Great Writers Inspire at Home: Reading Bass Culture'. Oxford Faculty of English Language and Literature. 26 April 2018. Available at <<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/reading-bass-culture>> [22 May 2019].

<sup>36</sup> David Kennedy and Keith Tuma, 'Introduction', in *Additional Apparitions: Poetry, Performance and Site Specificity*, ed. David Kennedy and Keith Tuma (Sheffield: Cherry on the Top Press, 2002) (p. 11), quoted in Virtanen, p. 11.

characteristics. Although these features are commonly used to define the poetry, they remain largely underanalysed. A comprehensive study of how they operate within this tradition is long overdue. Although each poem is analysed through the lens of a selected theme, in poetic practice, multiple themes overlap within the singularity of an individual poem. They are separated here only to facilitate discussion.

Because its life can extend over three or even four decades, a dub poem can undergo a series of transformations as it is realised over time in a number of different versions. A live version can be transformed as it is performed over and over again. Similarly, the text of a poem can be republished with alterations. In the following close readings, these differences matter. So do convergences, correspondences and intersections. The analysis must recognise that time, whether affecting the realisations of a poem either in the same format or in different modes of presentation, is a meaningful element in the making and development of aesthetic choices. It is tempting to interpret these changes, variations or transformations between versions as the results of spontaneity and improvisation in the process of creation. As opposed to Habekost, however, who takes improvisation and spontaneity for granted as intrinsic features of the poetic practice, I understand dub poetry as a well-rehearsed practice with no improvisation. Consequently, I see these changes as artistic experimentation, in which one can observe the construction of an aesthetic. Alongside these changes, it is also important to recognise unchanged material. Indeed, as a poem is repeated over time, some features remain intact. In the same way that differences matter, so do convergences. There is a series of mechanical repetitions in different

versions that similarly says something important about the poetry's aesthetic.

In order to facilitate access to the archival materials, this thesis uses versions of dub poems that are either recorded or printed. As opposed to live versions, recordings and print fix the performance into a particular version. In this process, the studio recording functions as a pivotal moment, fixing the poem in what is seen as the official version. This creates a pre-scripted performance offering a frame of execution which I use to evaluate changes, variations and transformations across versions. Moreover, the recording process creates a snapshot of the poem in a specific time and place, allowing the performance to travel across time in a crystallised form. This frozen format is a useful tool with which to identify the impact of time and thus to include in the development of my argument. It is important to note that not all changes have the same impact. I see some changes of words, for instance, as unintended deviations between performances. The poet uses a different word in the same way that a musician unintentionally hits a wrong note. These are insignificant alterations within the performance. Other changes are discussed as deliberate: differences of tempo, variations in musical accompaniment or an altered bass line, for example, are seen as conscious deviations. As said above, they are analysed as important sites of reflection for an analysis of the poetics of dub. Alongside these archival materials, readings, talks and live performances I have attended have also nourished my thinking. The remembered observations from these first-hand experiences indirectly complete the selected archival corpus. The choice to work with recordings rather than live versions has an important consequence for the methodology: it prevents critical engagement with and use of the audience in the

analysis. In performance studies, the audience is a site of investigation, as it is seen as a constitutive element of the performance. In Erving Goffman's definition of performance, for instance, the audience plays a defining role: 'a "performance" may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.'<sup>37</sup> Although Goffman's area of study is more concerned with the self and everyday life than with literature and the arts more generally, his theorisation of performance is based on human interactions that unfold during the event of a performance. His approach to performance depends on the existence of an audience. More closely related to the history of dub poetry, Brathwaite's discussion of poetry in *History of the Voice* similarly emphasises the presence and role of the audience.<sup>38</sup> He argues that the meaning of a performed piece lies not only in the work itself but also in its interaction with the audience. The audience, therefore, is an integral part of the performed work. It not only receives but also influences the work's creation, in a participatory and collaborative role. Keeping in mind the nature of the audience can indeed influence the performance, in areas such as linguistic choices, pronunciation and subject matter. For instance, the importance of addressing the local can be reconsidered in light of the poet's desire to engage with an international audience. It is without doubt that the audience requires special attention, as it affects certain aspects of the performance. Yet this thesis, because of the absence of a physical audience due to the recorded status of the selected

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<sup>37</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), pp. 15-16, quoted in Schechner, p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon, 1984), pp. 17-19.

performances, must leave the audience-based perspective unexplored. Working with the awareness of this limitation, I do not try to trace the untraceable presence of an imagined audience. I simply take for granted that dub poems have been written for a variety of audiences, with a series of consequences for the work. This methodological choice is further justified by the fact that the following close readings focus on the artistic elements that constitute the different versions of a dub poem. The audiences for these versions do not directly impact my approach to them.

## Notes on language

I have sufficiently warned against the danger of predefined categories. This section, primarily on language, finds in the reality of dub poetry's Jamaican context the creative input that will keep us from falling into reductive interpretations based on historical, national or geographical readings. These notes open the study by proposing the necessary mindset to explore the varieties of poetic innovation discussed in the following chapters. I use two written versions of LKJ's emblematic poem 'Bass Culture' to illustrate the creative distance that produces originality in this poetic language. The first is from *Dread, Beat and Blood*, published in 1975.<sup>39</sup> This poem was then republished in *Mi Revalueshanary Fren* in 2006—the second version.<sup>40</sup> Taking account of the time between these versions, this comparative reading is a response to criticism that continues to see poetics as 'the natural language of the poet'.<sup>41</sup>

There is a lasting idea that dub poetry is grounded in the continuum of Jamaican Creole.<sup>42</sup> Dub poetry uses

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<sup>39</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle L'Ouverture, 1975), p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Katherine McLeod, 'Textualizing Dub Poetry: A Literature Review of Jamaican English from Jamaica to Toronto'. 2007. Web page. Available at <<http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~cpercy/courses/eng6365-mcleod.htm>> [22 April 2012].

<sup>42</sup> David DeCamp first used the term 'continuum' to describe how coexisting speech forms in Creole societies oscillate between two poles, the acrolect and the basilect (David DeCamp, 'Towards a Generative Analysis of Post-Creole Speech Continuum', in *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*, ed. Dell Hymes (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 349-371). The acrolect is the language closer to the language of social prestige, while the basilect is the 'deep Creole', the language which not only lacks prestige but is also the most influenced by the native tongues of the slaves. In the context of Jamaica, the acrolect is the Queen's English, the language of power. The basilect, on the other hand, is closer to West African languages. Between these two poles, the two ends of the continuum, there are a number of varieties, referred to as mesolects, with features of

a mixture of Standard English and the creole vernacular derived from it. [...]

Creole can most conveniently be viewed on a continuum, with Standard English at one end and the most countrified creoles at the other and all the city-speak in between, that is Manchester, London, Bristol or Glasgow-based.<sup>43</sup>

Spelling is used as an analytical tool in discussions of this mixture of standard English and Jamaican English. It is interpreted as a space for representing the sound of this natural language on the page. In dub poetry, spelling can be a visual transcription of Jamaican language. It functions as a creole signifier whose phonetic rules the poets follow in their writing. LKJ has expressed in many places the influence of a Jamaican background on his writing:

The kind of thing that I write and the way I say it is a result of the tension between Jamaican Creole and Jamaican English and between those and English English. And all that, really, is the consequence of having been brought up in a colonial society, and then coming over here to live and go to school in England, soon afterwards. The tension builds up. You can see it in the writing.<sup>44</sup>

He has also mentioned a desire to write in his own language:

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both acrolect and basilect. As Stephanie Durreiman-Tame explains, in this continuum, the position of ‘standard language’ is held by the ‘variety which shows the most “superstrate” influence. Superstrate refers to the language spoken by the dominant group at the moment of language contact which in the case of Jamaica is English’ (Stephanie Durreiman-Tame, *The Syntax of Jamaica Creole: A Cartographic Perspective* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008), p. 1). LKJ’s combination of standard and non-standard English is a mesolect on this continuum.

<sup>43</sup> Fred D’Aguiar, ‘Have you Been Here Long? Black Poetry in Britain’, in *British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 51-71 (p. 59).

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood*, p. 8.

I was wondering, he's Trinidadian, he's Guyanese, he's Bajan, why are they aping somebody else's accent? Why can't they use their own language to express themselves, and I was determined to do that.<sup>45</sup>

Taking these quotes at face value, scholars have not critically engaged with the notion of a poet's 'own language'. It is important to remember that in the case of LKJ, his language of education, and hence literacy, is standard English. His spelling has a strong relationship to standard English, as he is fully aware of its rules and norms. The different versions of 'Bass Culture' nonetheless have both internal and external spelling variations and inconsistencies, but also similarities. Rather than being faithful transcriptions of sound, they illustrate the poet's playful manipulation of his poetic language.

Spelling helps to make sound visible by creating a continuity between the eyes and the ears. It is a visual means of bringing particular sounds within the poetry. In the case of dub poetry, it is the sound of Jamaican language. Yet most criticism has missed how poets use this correlation between sounds and signs to create a new language—or, to use LKJ's words, a language of their own. In *Introduction à Une Poétique du Divers*, Édouard Glissant opens the door to such alternative interpretations :

J'appelle langue créole une langue dont les éléments de constitution sont hétérogènes les uns aux autres. Je n'appellerai pas langue créole par exemple la superbe langue de ces poètes jamaïcains de la *dub poetry*, comme Michael Smith et Linton Kwesi Johnson [...]. On dit que c'est un créole jamaïcain – peut-

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<sup>45</sup> Caesar, 'Linton Kwesi Johnson Talks to Burt Caesar', p. 73. The quote refers to poets such as Sebastian Clarke, Jimi Rand, T-Bone Wilson and Jamal Ali.

être qu'il faut inventer un mot – mais je ne l'appellerai pas créole parce qu'il s'agit de la géniale et agressive déformation d'une langue, la langue anglaise, par des pratiquants subversifs de cette langue.<sup>46</sup>

I interpret this ‘brilliant and aggressive deformation of a language’ as the creative input that shapes the so-called transcription of the poet’s natural language. The notion of spelling in the following paragraphs is best understood as re-spelling. The poet uses a playful consciousness to re-spell familiar words.

‘Bass Culture’ uses common spellings as symbolic signifiers of Jamaican language. Here I follow Michael Aceto’s observations on the manifestation of Jamaican pronunciation in written words as a framework for discussing variations, inconsistencies and similarities in spelling choices.<sup>47</sup> I start with the poem’s 1975 version, which consistently deletes consonant clusters. The conjunction ‘and’, for instance, loses the final /d/ and becomes ‘an’: ‘an the leap an the weight-drop’, ‘an is a whole heappa’. The final stanza is the only place where the standard spelling appears: ‘and the beat will shiff’. In this example, the same pattern of consonant deletion is seen in the final /t/ in the monosyllabic word ‘shift’, as it is in the words ‘just’ and ‘must’: ‘an the beat jus lash / when the wall mus smash’. Similarly, the velar nasal /ŋ/ in words such as ‘pulsing’, ‘bubbling’ and ‘pushing’ is deleted. This is the most common type of re-spelling throughout the text: ‘in a

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<sup>46</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 21. ‘I call Creole language a language whose constitutional elements are heterogeneous with each other. I will not call Creole language, for example, the superb language of these Jamaican dub poets, such as Michael Smith and Linton Kwesi Johnson. They say it’s Jamaican Creole – maybe you have to make up a word – but I won’t call it Creole because it’s the awesome, aggressive distortion of a language, the English language, by subversive practitioners of this language.’

<sup>47</sup> Michael Aceto, ‘Caribbean Englishes’, in *The Handbook of World Englished*, ed. Yamuna Kachru Braj B. Kachru, Cecil L. Nelson (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 203-222.

form resemblin madness', 'burstin outta slave shakkle', 'culture pulsin'. Nonetheless, inconsistencies still appear: 'shattering the tightened hold', 'cause a maffog suffering', 'chanting loudly'. The sound of Jamaican creole further influences the text in its use of the open vowel /a/ in words such as 'hotta', instead of 'hotter', and 'powa', instead of 'power'. Here the final 'a' indicates Jamaican's non-pronunciation of postvocalic /r/. Yet 'gather', which would have been re-spelt 'gatha' to be consistent, is left in its standard form. The spelling of 'take' in 'soh life tek the form' similarly suggests Jamaican pronunciation, here of half-open monophthongal vowel /e/ instead of the diphthong /ei/ found in standard English. Finally, whereas standard spelling would use 'th' for the fricative /ð/ in words such as 'the', 'them' and 'than', because Jamaican pronunciation neutralises this sound by substituting the plosives /d/ and /t/, the text has 'dan' instead of 'than' in 'hotta dan de hites of fire' and 'de' for 'the' in 'is de cultural wave a dread people deal'. However, although this is a common convention of Jamaican spelling, this is the only example of it in the text. 'The', 'this' and 'that' are otherwise kept in their standard form:

it is the beat of the heart,  
this pulsing of blood  
that is a bubblin bass

The transformations discussed up to now are graphic means of signifying the sounds of Jamaican English. Other spelling choices move away from conventional markers of Jamaican pronunciation. The spellings of 'gainst', 'cause', 'heappa' and 'outta' are not specifically chosen to represent the sound of this so-called natural language. In 'gainst' and 'cause', the first syllable is deleted. 'Of' becomes an open /a/ in the contractions 'outta' ('out of') and 'heappa' ('heap of'). These are

colloquial versions of words in a non-standard form of English. In Jannis Androutsopoulos's terms, they function as 'orality markers' of informal speech.<sup>48</sup> In these examples, the poet demonstrates a conscious use of colloquial spelling. In the same way, words such as 'muzik' and 'shakkle' are more examples of playful transformation beyond creole signifiers. Indeed, the re-spelling of these words functions beyond the relationship between sounds and signs. From a phonetic point of view, these changes are redundant: the use of the homophonic letter 'z' instead of 's' or 'k' instead of 'c' functions only on a visual level, with no consequence for pronunciation. Yet these are technical signs to visually indicate a creative distance from standard norms and rules of spelling. In D. J. Allerton's terms, these elements specifically function to show 'maximal differentiation' from the norms in the creation of the poet's language.<sup>49</sup>

A comparative analysis of the version of 'Bass Culture' published in *Mi Revalueshanary Fren* (2002) reveals changes that illustrate an ongoing development of this created language over time. This version is an interesting back and forth exploration of the flexibility of spelling: new spellings are used to further emphasise maximum differentiation, while other words appear in their standard forms. Some choices are more difficult to interpret, as they do not indicate a clear intention. For instance, this version uses 'di' in the place of the first version's 'de',

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<sup>48</sup> Jannis K. Androutsopoulos, 'Displays of Subcultural Identity in Mediated (Printed) Discourse', in *Language and Ideology: Selected Papers from the 6th International Pragmatics Conference*, ed. Jef Verschueren (Antwerp: International Pragmatics Association, 1999) (p. 35), quoted in Mark Sebba, *Spelling and Society: The Culture and Politics of Orthography around the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 37.

<sup>49</sup> D. J. Allerton, 'Orthography and Dialect: How Can Different Regional Pronunciations Be Accommodated in a Single Orthography?', in *Standard Languages: Spoken and Written*, ed. William Haas (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), pp. 57-69 (p. 65), quoted in Sebba, p. 110.

both alternatives to the standard English ‘the’ whose spellings have an informal ideology that functions within a recognised system of deviations. They can even be used interchangeably. Yet while the first version uses the standard ‘the’ most of the time, the republished version is consistent in its use of ‘di’. Similarly, this second version drops the final /d/ from the monosyllabic word ‘sound’ and the velar nasal /ŋ/ from the word ‘shattering’ in order to show greater consistency in its spelling transformations. Indeed, these words appear in their standard forms in the first version, despite these consonants being the sites of common re-spelling. Other transformations have stronger ideological implications. The addition of /h/ to the ends of words such as ‘hattah’, ‘powah’ and ‘bittah’ does not convey a clear intention in terms of pronunciation. The spelling in the first version is already a signifier of Jamaican language, and the /h/ at the end of these words has no effect on the pronunciation. In these examples, the poet expresses maximum differentiation more intensely, with transformations that visually, rather than phonetically, move even further away from standard forms. Conversely, the deletion of the second ‘f’ from the first version’s ‘shiff’, to make ‘shif’, is somehow in contradiction with this trend, as it minimises differentiation from the standard ‘shift’. It nonetheless retains the deletion of the final /t/, already discussed as a conventional re-spelling in Jamaican English. Finally, this version displays a surprising return to a standard form. The word ‘shakkle’ in the first version is here spelt ‘shackle’. This is rather unexpected, considering that the double ‘k’, like the double ‘f’ of ‘shiff’, shows maximum differentiation. This choice also functions independently of a sounds-sign relationship. It is motivated by another intention.

The back and forth movements in LKJ's exploration of spelling are conscious manifestations of aesthetic choices, results of the poet's creativity. They are not illustrations of a natural language. Instead, they are motivated by anti-hegemonic views contesting an artistic context that continues to see standard English as the norm for literary expression. These preliminary notes on language and spelling should be used as a starting point to think through the development of interpretative frameworks that take the creative input brought to the poetry as a fundamental element of productive readings.

# **Part I**

## **Chapter 1: A brief guide to dub poetry**

### **History of the form**

Dub poetry has received very little academic attention. No works have taken it as the main object of study. The series of controversies in the reception of the term 'dub poetry' itself have probably played an influential role in discouraging any convincing analyses of the practice of this poetic style. Over the years, the definition of dub poetry has remained problematic. In common debates, the term usually refers to a style of poetry more often than not recited over reggae music. This definition has been criticised as too specific, as it places the poetry within a predefined style. In order to avoid thus confining the poetry to a restrictive category, critics have used looser terms to place it in the larger context of a continuum of performed, oral, popular, black vernacular poetics. Discussions of specific elements, such as storytelling, drumming, lyricism and chanting, have extended and cross-connected the form to other poetries of a larger black literary tradition. Yet such a wide approach, which sees the term 'dub poetry' as insignificant, often understands this poetry simply as a generic phenomenon of the spoken and performed word. In order to reconcile this view with a more universal understanding of performance, scholars have used a variety of terms, such as 'performance poetry', 'spoken word', 'oral poetry'. Bruce King, for

instance, switches indiscriminately amongst ‘performance poetry’, ‘dub poetry’ and ‘oral poetry’.<sup>50</sup> In the introduction to *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain*, Kadija Sesay also moves between ‘dub poetry’ and ‘performance poetry’.<sup>51</sup> And the British periodical *Woofah*, dedicated to reggae, grime and dubstep music, refers to Michael Smith’s work as ‘performance poetry’ rather than ‘dub poetry’.<sup>52</sup> These terminology choices are not without consequences. As Carolyn Cooper notes, the term ‘performance poetry’ has its own limitations, as it lacks the militant, cultural and historical connotations, as well as the aesthetic context, of the term ‘dub’:

What is lost is the allusive power of the emotive label ‘dub’, with its onomatopoeic drum resonances and its recognition, in the naming, of the roots of this artistic movement in the reggae culture of urban revolt: working a rhythm that is the dub-side of both middle-class respectability and the somewhat constricting conventions of the iambic pentameter.<sup>53</sup>

It is true that ‘performance poetry’ has a neutralising effect, as it loosely includes all types of poetries-in-performance, from ‘jazz to choreo-poetry, from cabaret to soundpoetry’.<sup>54</sup> In Cooper’s words again, ‘when “dub” poetry is dubbed “performance” poetry it goes genteelly up-market’.<sup>55</sup> Despite many attempts to

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<sup>50</sup> Bruce King, *The Internationalization of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> Courtia Newland and Kadija Sesay ed., *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Bartosz Wójcik, *Afro-Caribbean Poetry: Cultural Traditions (1970s-2000s)* (New York: Peter Lang Edition, 2015), p. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the ‘Vulgar’ Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 80.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Beasley, ‘Vive la Différence: Performance Poetry’, *Critical Quarterly*, 28 (1996), pp. 28-38 (p. 29) <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1996.tb02261.x/pdf>> [22 November 2015].

<sup>55</sup> Cooper, p. 81.

explain what makes a poem specifically a dub poem, no study has provided a convincing definition:

[...] the epithet “dub poetry” has been adapted by many in the media as being synonymous with all West Indian British poetry from the 1970s onwards, a situation compounded by the inability to agree upon what it is that constitutes a “dub” poet.<sup>56</sup>

Both poets and critics alike have tended to reject the term as a label for the poetry. Indeed, as Mutabaruka explains, ‘The dub poet thing is a limitation to one’s need to move, because if you do some other things people say you go astray. ... My poetry is just: poetry’.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, LKJ says, ‘I’m not a dub poet and I don’t want to be classified as one. ... I’ve always seen myself as a poet full stop.’<sup>58</sup> This struggle of the poet to have his/her work recognised as poetry has a long history. The early years of LKJ’s career illustrate this continuing tension. Even with the black radical publisher Jessica Huntley, he says, the acceptance of his first full-length book, *Dread Beat an’ Blood*, required ‘a tremendous amount of persuasion [...] because a lot of people had told her it wasn’t poetry’.<sup>59</sup> Throughout his working life, his growing reputation as a performer tended to shadow the recognition of his work

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<sup>56</sup> Wójcik, p. 20. Original quote in Ian Dieffenthaller, *Snow on Sugarcane: The Evolution of West Indian Poetry in Britain* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 115.

<sup>57</sup> Habekost, p. 3. Original quote in Stephen Davis and Peter Simon, *Reggae Bloodlines: In Search of the Music and Culture of Jamaica* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 190.

<sup>58</sup> Habekost, p. 3. Citation from Neil Spencer, ‘The Age of Insurreckshan: Interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson’, *New Musical Express*, 17 March 1984.

<sup>59</sup> Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, ‘Publishing Postcolonial Poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, ed. Jahan Ramazani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 237-248 (p. 244). On the other side of the Atlantic, Lillian Allen, a female pioneer of Canada’s dub scene, recounts how she was denied membership in the Canadian League of Poetry because dub poetry was not ‘real’ poetry (Lisa Tomlinson, *The African-Jamaican Aesthetic: Cultural Retention and Transformation across Borders* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2017), p. 76).

within poetic parameters. Even today, he continues to be ‘primarily identified as a performer’.<sup>60</sup> Although his work was issued as a volume of Penguin Modern Classics in 2002, a canonising gesture by England’s mainstream literary culture, this move into the tower of ‘proper poetry’ raised unapologetic criticism:

during a BBC broadcast a critic argued that, while Johnson’s poetry might convey feeling, it does not necessarily qualify as serious literary work. Another critic, perhaps fearful that the canon’s walls were being breached or were about to be exploded by an unorthodox poet who for the most part does not even write in English, attempted to dismiss Johnson as an oddity or novel curiosity rather than a serious poet.<sup>61</sup>

Yet ‘dub poetry’ remains a useful term to distinguish the work of dub poets from other poetry practices. The controversies around this term need to be understood in light of the limitations, but also the possibilities, in the strong connotations of the culturally loaded word ‘dub’. It has an unquestionable affiliation with the tradition of Jamaican sound systems, bringing a series of predefined associations and expectations. Understanding of dub poetry has crystallised around these cultural expectations, which function as markers of geographical, historical and political belonging, and the artistic elements of dub poetry are then read as products of these reductive markers. Today it is still difficult to make these fixed boundaries more fluid. In order to reconsider the term with more imagination, the following paragraphs unpack a set of stylistic traits and technical procedures that

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<sup>60</sup> Jerome C. Branche, ‘Speaking Truth, Speaking Power: Of “Immigrants”, Immanence, and Linton Kwesi Johnson’s “Street 66”?’<sup>61</sup>, in *The Poetics and Politics of Diaspora: Transatlantic Musing* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 69-96 (p. 85).

<sup>61</sup> David Austin, *Dread Poetry and Freedom: Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Unfinished Revolution* (London: Pluto Press and Between the Lines, 2018), p. 69.

best characterise dub. I do not intend to provide a full-length history of dub music. Even 40 years after its first appearance, the term continues to have contrasting definitions.<sup>62</sup> Staying within the scope of this thesis, the following discussion investigates key aspects that are closely related to the development of dub poetry. As I reconsider their role and place in the practice of this poetic style, I also want to reconsider the relationship between poetry and dub, too often taken for granted. In providing a brief overview of the technical and conceptual processes at the core of dub music, I show how the term ‘dub’ can contribute to the development of an alternative interpretative framework, opening new doors to a study of dub poetry’s innovative form. As Michael Veal writes in his excellent book *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*: ‘As much as the music [dub] has to tell us about the obvious tropes of race, nation, culture, it has other stories to tell about art, aesthetics, technology, and the nature of modernity.’<sup>63</sup> Similarly, I want to show how the various technical and conceptual aspects of the musical practice of ‘dub’ can contribute to the development of more refined interpretations of the poetry.

In an audiovisual context (e.g. film or television), ‘to dub’ means to change the language of a spoken production by using a different voice from what was originally recorded. In other words, to dub is to record a new voice on top of a soundtrack. In dub poetry, this soundtrack may be a musical accompaniment over which the dub poet places his/her voice. In such a case, ‘to dub’ simply suggests the process of recording the voice on top of an instrumental line. In a Jamaican

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<sup>62</sup> See ‘Varying Definitions of the Term Dub’, in Veal, pp. 61-64.

<sup>63</sup> Veal, p. 22.

context, ‘dub’ is a term connected to subgenres of reggae music. Veal’s study describes it as ‘a style in which the Jamaican pop song was electronically deconstructed and reconfigured by a generation of studio engineers’.<sup>64</sup> Dub is thus both a style of music and a musical process with technical and conceptual aspects. Although technical and conceptual aspects are understood together in the tradition of dub, here they are discussed separately for a better appreciation of their contributions to dub poetry. On first emerging within the tradition of Jamaican sound systems, the term ‘dub’ referred to the music-only—that is, with no vocals—version of a reggae song.<sup>65</sup> Also known as a ‘dub plate’ or ‘rhythm version’, a dub version was recorded on the B-side of a 45 rpm record.<sup>66</sup> The process of transforming a reggae song into a dub plate—in other words, dubbing a song—entailed ‘tak[ing] out some of the instruments and some of the voice and put[ting] the new, dub version] on the other side of a 45.’<sup>67</sup> This was done by a sound engineer in a studio. These versions, stripped down to the song’s essential structure, which is the combination of the bass and drums and/or the basic chord progression, were prerecorded musical tracks that could then be filled with special effects, such as echo and reverb, or sounds such as breaking glass, car horns, gunfire, and screams. In the space and silences of the dub version, the sound engineer could play with these effects to deconstruct and reconstruct the song. These rhythm versions were first used in sound systems, with DJs, toasters and

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<sup>64</sup> Veal, p. 34.

<sup>65</sup> Sound systems are ‘mobile outfits playing recorded music in dancehalls or outdoor clearings, which emerged as a more viable economic alternative to the large dance bands that they rapidly replaced’ (Veal, p. 42).

<sup>66</sup> A rhythm version is technically the same as a dub version, but, as opposed to being strictly available to sound system operators, it can be purchased commercially (Veal, p. 54).

<sup>67</sup> Veal, p. 54.

MCs chatting over the musical track.<sup>68</sup> Comprising only instrumental layers, the dub plate had enough room for verbal improvisation during the dance. In the 1970s, technological progress in recording studios made possible new manipulations and brought the live context of dubbing and Djing into the studio's closed space. DJs continued to improvise over the prerecorded B-sides of reggae albums while staying thematically connected to the original song of the A-side. With time, the creativity of the sound engineers generated a characteristic sound that developed and became recognised as a genre of its own.<sup>69</sup> Dub versions circulated as independent singles and even albums rather than functioning only as B-sides. They were still related to an original vocal version but became new and independent instrumental versions through the transformation of musical elements that nonetheless remained recognisable. Dub poetry responded to these advances, ushering new forms of creativity into the world of poetry.

It is important to note that whereas dub poets might have first used prerecorded tapes in their performances, in the tradition of the DJs, original music composed specifically for the poems soon became a particularity of this form. LKJ's encounter and collaboration with the sound engineer and musician Dennis Bovell in 1974 was a turning point in the musical dimension of dub poetry, as that is when

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<sup>68</sup> The term 'DJ' can refer to different actions. In this chapter, it means the singing, toasting, chanting practice of Jamaican artists such as Big Youth, U-Roy, I-Roy, and Dillinger rather than the work of the selector, who plays the song for a dance. It refers to the practice of the master of ceremonies (MC) and is the art of the rapper, the verbalist. It is different from the more generic 'disc jockey', the person who selects and plays records at a party. For an in-depth analysis of Jamaican deejay culture in the UK, see William 'Lez' Henry, *What the Deejay Said: A Critique from the Street!* (New York: Nu-Beyong, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> The sound engineers Lee Perry, King Tubby, Prince Jammy and Errol Thompson are often cited as this genre's pioneers.

original songs began to be composed for specific poems.<sup>70</sup> Bovell played a crucial role in increasing dub poetry's popularity, due to the music he made specifically for it. His collaboration with Michael Smith too was fundamental in bringing poetic words into a musical context. Putting music to the words, he moved dub poems from books to recorded studio versions. Dub poetry's particular ability to present poems in different formats is therefore due to both the poet and the sound engineer. A poem's original musical accompaniment reveals a clear distinction between the work of the dub poet and the work of the DJ. Whether the music or the poem is composed first depends on the working process of the individual poet. However, in the tradition of dub poetry, a poem is specifically connected to an original musical track, composed especially for that poem. As LKJ explains:

I myself, and Oku Onuora himself and Michael Smith are using original music, which comes out of the poetry that we write, to call it 'dub poetry' I think is a little misguided, because 'dub poetry' implies that you get a piece of dub music and put some poetry to it – which is what the deejays do. They get a piece of instrumental music or a song with the lyrics taken out and improvise spontaneous lyricism describing everyday happenings and events.<sup>71</sup>

Alongside the combination of words and music found in the practice of the Djs and used as an influence in the art of the dub poets, there is an interesting structural parallel between certain dub poems and extended dub versions, seven-to-eight-minute tracks in which the original song is followed by its dub version. Whereas

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<sup>70</sup> Dennis Bovell Interviewed by Fergus Murphy. Red Bull Music Academy. 2004. Available at <<https://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/lectures/dennis-bovell-bass-culture>> [03 July 2019].

<sup>71</sup> Mervyn Morris, 'In Search of Justice: Linton Kwesi Johnson Interviewed', in *Making West Indian Literature* (Jamaica: Randle Publishers, 2005), pp. 84-95 (p. 94).

previously the dub version was on the B-side, in an extended version the dub comes right after the original, giving DJs more time to toast, as they did not need to stop to flip the record over.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, many of LKJ's poems can be divided into two sections: first, the poem performed over a musical track, and second, the musical track without the poet's voice. As the close readings will further discuss, it is in the second section that Bovell 'extends' the concerns of the vocal version into a dub version. The succession of these two sections hints at the format of an extended dub version.

It is important to emphasise the emergence of dub plates, or rhythm versions, as a result of both technological developments in the recording studio and the rise of DJs, toasters and talk-overs. On the one hand, as a product of the global evolution of sound recording technology in the twentieth century, dub is an example of the act of recording sound seen as more than just a faithful re-creation of a performance. Recording a song not only fixes the live performance into a physical object—it is an artistic act in itself. Dub is a studio-based creation in which sound engineers have the role of composer. Using the mixing board, they open the song from within. New recording technologies allow them to deconstruct and reconstruct songs. On the other hand, the rise of the practice of Djing required songs to have enough space and silence for the DJ to show his/her artistic skills. It is in the conjunction of these two creative impulses that innovations in dub poetry must be understood. The collaboration between the DJ and the sound engineer offered an example of artistic combination of music and words. Dub poets could

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<sup>72</sup> For an example of an extended version, listen to The Mighty Diamonds. Gates of Zion (12'). Greensleeves Records. 1980 [LP] <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hk-NbKvVXo&feature=youtu.be>> [06 July 2019].

identify with this familiar form and practice. In the article ‘Jamaican Rebel Music’, LKJ notes the roots of dub poetry in the style of the Jamaican DJs from the 1950s, referred to as ‘the dub-lyricists’:

The dub lyricist is the dj turned poet. He intones his lyrics rather than sings them. Dub lyricism is a new form of (oral) music poetry, wherein the lyricist overdubs rhythmic phrases on to the rhythm background of a popular song. Dub lyricists include poets like Big Youth, I Roy, U Roy, Dillinger, Shorty the President, Prince Jazzbo and others.<sup>73</sup>

With politically engaged lyrics, the DJs’ toasts are seen as the newspapers of the ghetto. The dub poet shares this commitment to social realism, or ‘street journalism’, in which the words of both function as underground media.<sup>74</sup> As already mentioned, it was in the dub extension of a reggae tune that space was created for DJs to entertain, by talking to the crowd and addressing social issues. They acted as important social commentators to keep their audiences tuned into the everyday of their community. Often in these informal informative spaces, the mission of the DJs’ words was to transcend the mainstream news by telling the other, untold half of the story, articulating the ‘hidden narrative’ silenced by the mainstream media. In addition to their intrinsic entertaining dimension, lyrics offer education from the ‘yard’.<sup>75</sup> Being ‘thoughtists’, to use William ‘Lez’ Henry’s

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<sup>73</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, ‘Jamaican Rebel Music’, *Race & Class*, 17 (1976), pp. 398-412 (p. 398) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/030639687601700404>> [5 June 2014].

<sup>74</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei, ‘The Sound of Culture: Dread Discourse and Sound Systems’, in *Language, Rhythm, & Sound: Black Popular Cultures into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Joseph K. Adjaye and Adrienne R. Andrews (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1997) (p. 191).

<sup>75</sup> William ‘Lez’ Henry, *What the Deejay Said*, p. 85. This hidden narrative is a common theme in reggae songs (see, for instance, Dennis Brown’s 1978 classic song ‘The Half’ ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06x99Lb\\_RP0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06x99Lb_RP0)). It is linked to an historical past that

word, DJs have a social and political responsibility: they teach consciousness, deconstruct particular images and rewrite reality.<sup>76</sup> The flip side of a record—in other words, the dub remix—became a platform for a ghetto voice to speak ‘the truth’. It is this use of a political voice from the underground, from everyday life, on top of an instrumental track that puts the dub poet in the lineage of the DJ. They share an obvious ability to provide ‘witty social and political commentary’ on top of a musical track.<sup>77</sup> Yet although the relationship between the DJ and the dub poet is well established, it remains ambiguous and underanalysed. *Voiceprint* notes that dub poems ‘represent an extension of the much older toaster tradition’.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, dub poetry is a ‘body of poetry which is written to be performed to the same kind of musical accompaniment as that used by deejays’.<sup>79</sup> The obvious relationship between the two has had the negative side effect that scholars have oversimplified their artistic parallels. The dub poet’s inspiration by the art of the DJs and the resulting development of this style remain underexamined.

Despite these straightforward connections, dub poets have continuously called

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Babylon intentionally keeps secret. In a Rastafarian context, ‘Babylon’ refers to the white-European colonial and imperialist power structure that has oppressed the ‘sufferers’, the dominated people, the modern slaves. Sarah Daynes adds a religious dimension to this untold story: in reggae, Rastafarianism comes ‘as the revelation of this denied, hidden, religious, and historical truth’ (Sarah Daynes, *Time and Memory in Reggae Music: The Politics of Hope* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 170).

<sup>76</sup> William ‘Lez’ Henry, *What the Deejay Said*, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Edward Archibald Markham, ‘Random Thoughts’, in *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain*, ed. Edward Archibald Markham (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1989), pp. 13-42 (p. 36).

<sup>78</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, ‘Introduction’, in *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean* ed. Stewart Brown, Mervyn Morris, and Gordon Rohlehr (Harlow: Longman, 1989), pp. 1-23 (p. 17).

<sup>79</sup> Carolyn Cooper and Hubert Devonish, ‘A Tale of Two States: Language, Lit/orature and the Two Jamaicas’, in *The Pressures of the Text: Orality, Texts and the Telling of Tales*, ed. Stewart Brown (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1995), pp. 60-75 (p. 70).

for the recognition of a clear line between their work and that of DJs. In making this distinction, LKJ explains in the documentary *Dread Beat an' Blood* that the dub poets start with the written word. They write poetry with 'rhythm and beat', and music automatically comes out of the poetry. The DJ, however, 'begins with a backing track, with music, and improvises lyrics to fit the music'.<sup>80</sup> In comparable terms, Mutabaruka explains that 'the first move of the poet is the word. The first move of the deejay is the riddim'.<sup>81</sup> In light of such testimonies, scholars have made similar arguments:

The difference between an MC (the contemporary version of a DJ) and a dub poet is that a dub poet is not tied to the rhythm of the music, but starts with the words and weaves them through a performed rhythm that emerged from the words.<sup>82</sup>

In the dancehall, the DJ's rhetorical skill effectively consists of fitting the 'words into the shape of a mood, or the fluid rhythm of a line'.<sup>83</sup> The album *Screaming Target* (1972) by the much-admired lyricist Big Youth, for instance, is a good illustration of a toasting style where the declamation of the words is shaped by the groove, the musical mood of the instrumental tracks. The album is a type of

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<sup>80</sup> *Dread Beat an' Blood*. dir. Franco Rosso. Rebel Movies. 1979 [DVD] <<https://archive.org/details/dreadbeatandblood>> [17 June 2017]. This distinction is also mentioned in the interview The Rebel Beat, 'The Rebel Beat Podcast 009 – Linton Kwesi Johnson, Dub Poetry, and Black Resistance'. Fireband Records 2015. Available at <<https://rebelbeatradio.com/2015/04/08/the-rebel-beat-podcast-009-linton-kwesi-johnson-dub-poetry-and-black-resistance/>>.

<sup>81</sup> Eric Doumerc, 'From Page-Poet to Recoding Artist: Mutabaruka Interviewed by Eric Doumerc', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 44 (2009), pp. 23-31 (p. 25) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0021989409342150>> [13 June 2017].

<sup>82</sup> Maria Caridad Casas, *Multimodality in Canadian Black Feminist Writing: Orality and the Body in the Work of Harris, Philip, Allen, and Brand* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 21.

<sup>83</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, 'Some Problems of Assessment: A Look at New Expressions in the Arts of the Contemporary Caribbean', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 17 (1971), pp. 92-113 (p. 103) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40653492>> [05 August 2016].

fragmented call and response, a combination of prerecorded lyrics from original tunes layered with new verses and a toast by Big Youth. His declamatory style, used like an instrument, is a direct response to the music: some of his words are disarticulated to fit, but also to enhance, the tune's sonic soundscape. They become short and hardly comprehensible onomatopoeias. In this deconstructive process, lyrics are used for their sonic effect rather than their semantic content. As Veal explains, the lyrics of the DJs share the aesthetic of fragmentation and juxtaposition found in the construction/deconstruction of dub music. There is indeed a sense that the fragmented aspect of Big Youth's poetic lines mirrors the restructuring work of the engineer. Dub music and dub lyrics share a 'decentring of textual and musical syntax', 'a surreal treatment of song form' and 'fragmented and/or stacked narrative voices'.<sup>84</sup> Veal's insightful comment on this relationship deserves to be quoted at length:

Rapping, chanting, and shouting their laconic improvisations often irrespective of harmonic or formal changes, and asking their selectors to "pull up" (stop and restart the record) at every opportunity, the deejays were rudely and creatively disrespectful of song form. Ultimately, the aesthetic of fragmented and superimposed vocalizing that would become such an important part of dub music could be thought of as at least partially inspired by the performance style of the sound system DJs and selectors.<sup>85</sup>

In this fragmenting, collaging and layering of dub lyrics, combining original and new words through erasure and recycling, the one-dimensionality of the original

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<sup>84</sup> Veal, p. 216.

<sup>85</sup> Veal, p. 56.

song is lost. The new ‘hypernarratives’—in other words, narratives ‘in which meaning remain[s] suspended between two or more collaged texts, ultimately resolving to neither and inspiring novel interpretations through their juxtaposition’—have limited straightforward messages, which nonetheless offer more flexibility in interpretation than the original.<sup>86</sup> In the dancehall, the DJ’s aim is to lift the audience’s mood and keep a good rhythm for the dance, without forgetting to address society’s ills. To do so, they do not hesitate to use catchy phrases, including ‘gibberish, riddles, nonsense rhymes, proverbs’.<sup>87</sup> These are important devices to keep the voice in the rhythm of the tune and therefore continuously connected to the dancing environment. The style is as important as, if not more important than, the clarity of the message. Style is used to catch the crowd’s attention so that it stays entertained. Count Machuki, one of the pioneer Jamaican DJs, remembers:

I used these words to sell our local recordings: ‘French Canadian home-cooked musical biscuit’. [...] I developed jives like ‘I’m hard to catch, I’m hard to hold’. I found that people go crazy, so, you know, I keep digging, digging, I came up with ‘Whether you be young or old, you just got to let the good times roll, my friend!’<sup>88</sup>

In the above quote, the immediacy of the dance is discussed as a space of improvisation. Depending on the vibes that night, elements in the performance are changed, added, dropped. Each live performance, therefore, has different

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<sup>86</sup> Veal, p. 69.

<sup>87</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 301.

<sup>88</sup> Eric Doumerc, ‘Jamaica’s First Dub Poets: Early Jamaican Deejaying as a Form of Oral Poetry’, *Kunapipi: Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 26 (2004), pp. 129-139 (p. 131) <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol26/iss1/13/>> [09 June 2016].

configurations of the initial materials. The process of production continues in the dancehall. It is in frequent live performance that the DJ develops, masters and rehearses his/her style. In the recording studio, although new technology is always explored, the aesthetic of fragmentation—as heard in Big Youth’s *Screaming Target*—continues to characterise the style of many DJ lyricists. One way to understand this approach is to contrast what Curt Sachs called ‘logogenic’ music to ‘pathogenic’ sound: while comprehensible words are the basis of logogenic music, pure sound, with dissolution of meaning, is what governs pathogenic music.<sup>89</sup> The style of the DJ-lyricists, with its cryptically evocative lyrics and its phonemic fragments, corresponds to the pathogenic category. Another way to understand this aesthetic is to connect the dynamism of the DJs’ approach to words to the larger enterprise of destroying the coloniser’s language. Any study of Caribbean poetics will show how language is a battleground for the emergence of a decolonised aesthetic. The destructive dimension of the DJ’s verbal dexterity suits not only the soundscape, the groove and the texture of the song. As Veal explains, ‘it also fractured narrative conventions in a way that broke open the logic of the colonial language, enabling the DJs to gradually move Jamaican patwa to the forefront of the country’s popular music and culture’.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the DJs’ subversive infusing of the original songs with their localised creole language played an important role in opening the doors for the exploration of decolonised poetics. They helped to develop what is seen as a true and ‘authentic’ subaltern Jamaican voice. Quoting Veal again, the dub mix ‘liberated the officially

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<sup>89</sup> Veal, p. 66. Original quote from chapter 2, section VI of Curt Sachs, *The Wellsprings of Music* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1962).

<sup>90</sup> Veal, p. 216.

marginalized, class-based social and political discourse offered by the sound system DJs'.<sup>91</sup> As the DJs became popular, they helped to produce a creative space in which grassroots literature in Jamaican English could emerge and flourish.<sup>92</sup> Dub poetry responded to this revalorisation of the 'root-sticality' of language.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, on a more general level, the DJs' popularity came at a time that also witnessed an artistic interest in poetry written by and for the masses. Circulating outside the traditional medium of a book, the DJs' verbal agility, and the subsequent poetic line of the dub poets, gained them a certain trust as attention to the 'root-sticality' of art increased.

In a departure from the traditional DJ's approach mentioned above, where meaning and style often clash, the DJ-lyricist Prince Far I dramatically slows down the declamatory mode on his album *Psalms for I* (1976), which encourages a meditative mood rather than dancing. The poet refrains from using gibberish, riddles or nonsense rhymes to fit the mood of the dub. The words are well articulated, and throughout the album his conversational tone carries the preaching vibe, reflecting the sermonic mode at the album's core. The poet's desire to preach and teach the Rastafarian faith obviously influences the clarity of his words and the intelligibility of the message. The communicative aspect of the songs is fundamental and cannot be compromised by the usual verbal style of Djing. A song like 'Foggy Road' on *Message from the King* (1978),<sup>94</sup> chanted with a

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<sup>91</sup> Veal, p. 216.

<sup>92</sup> Barber, p. 72.

<sup>93</sup> The invented term 'root-sticality' refers to Jamaican roots culture, characterised by conscious, religious, militant reggae music, called roots reggae music.

<sup>94</sup> The original song is by Burning Spear and was released on the album *Rocking Time* (1974).

slower declamatory style than traditional Djing, uses a more structured, linear narrative than, for example, the more experimental toasts of Big Youth, with their short and fragmented lyrics. The song starts with a chorus in which the poet uses a singing voice. It has repeated words, eight-syllable lines and a single rhyme scheme, reminding the listener of a song's regular structure:

The road is so foggy, foggy  
The road is so icy, icy  
The road is so coolie, coolie  
The road is so foggy, foggy

Prince Far I then switches to a conversational tone. He does not follow the rhythmic pattern of the music. The poetic lines now have irregular lengths and no longer follow the fixed rhyme scheme found in the chorus. In this slow declamatory style, variations of speech patterning such as vocal range, variations in the loudness of the voice, inclusions of pauses and careful manipulations of breath control become more audible.<sup>95</sup> The first line, for instance, has clear stops after 'there', 'beach' and 'shore'. The voice adopts a pace that allows the listener to follow the narrative of the story. Prince Far I's declamation suggests a different mode of listening. Indeed, it is a style that is not used to liven up the dance. Words are addressed to an audience carefully listening to the message. Immediacy, spontaneity and improvisation, specific elements of a live context, do not shape the style of this toast. Dub poetry's innovations enter this enunciation space, where the one-dimensional narrative structure regains its central place. Indeed, as opposed to the DJs, whose fragmented hypernarratives rely more on emotive

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<sup>95</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 301.

sound than on comprehensible words, many dub poets refused to have their lyrics ‘rubbed out in the dub’, as the process of deconstruction/reconstruction in the sound engineers’ post-performance manipulations would likely compromise the political message conveyed by the text. Keeping words central to their practice, dub poets preferred to recite their words in a linear way, and then hand over the second part of the song to the engineer to dub the instrumental version.<sup>96</sup> As Veal explains:

In England, where the idea of “dub poetry” was often directly linked to the actual technique of dub mixing, dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson resolved this conflict through a more traditional approach, chanting his political toasts without interruption before turning the tracks over to engineer Dennis Bovell, who mixed the second half of each track as a dub background for jazz improvisations by the members of Johnson’s band.<sup>97</sup>

LKJ underlines the importance of the clarity of the words in his explanation of the distinction between the DJ and the dub poet:

The deejays’ [history and tradition] is rooted in the sound system culture, and it’s functional in so far as the whole idea behind it is to liven up the dance, and to “nice up the dance”, and to get people involved in the music. So in that way it’s by nature different from so-called dub poetry, because dub poetry functions [as] something within its own right: as poetry, it functions as poetry to be

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<sup>96</sup> Veal, p. 70.

<sup>97</sup> Veal, p. 82.

recited to poetry-listening audiences, something separate from the sound system tradition.<sup>98</sup>

The above quote points to clearly distinctive contexts of production and reception. While the DJ belongs to the dancehall, the dub poet belongs to a literary environment. He is addressing his work to a poetry-listening audience. Dub poetry has the difficult task of finding a line between the DJ and the dub poet. In LKJ's poem 'Street 66', analysed in the close reading of part 2, the DJ I-Roy is unproblematically referred to as the 'mitey poet'. In the cultural context in which Djing and dub poetry arose, there is a political consciousness around the DJ's poetical skills. Coming from the popular sphere of the dancehall, he uses the poetics of the everyday in his art. The distinction between these two figures is further complicated by dub poetry's particularity of being in *and* out of the dancehall: it is sometimes performed for a public with reggae concerts within the popular sphere of the dancehall, but it is also performed in more traditional spaces, such as libraries, conferences and public readings in art galleries. Regardless of this in-and-out position, it is important to keep in mind that dub poetry is written as poetry, and therefore needs to be approached as poetry. Critics must develop interpretative tools that respond to the poetic innovations created through the dub poet's inspiration by the art of the DJs and the sound engineers. The historical overview of criticism of dub poetry presented in the following section shows how this lack of appropriate analytical tools has led to restrictive interpretations. Yet

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<sup>98</sup> Anne Dominique Curtius, 'La Rastalogie, la Dub Poetry et l'Antillanité-Tout-Monde d'Édouard Glissant Entrent en Relation', in *Entours d'Édouard Glissant*, ed. Valérie Loichot (Paris: Septentrion, 2013), pp. 55-72 (p. 58). Original quote in Mervyn Morris, 'Linton Kwesi Johnson interviewed by Mervyn Morris', *Jamaica Journal*, 20 (1987), pp. 23-25 .

despite being restrictive in its interpretations, previous criticism of dub poetry has produced significant debates for me to respond to. One contribution of this study is to continue these debates, without necessarily agreeing with their previous conclusions.

## History of criticism

To my knowledge, no academic work has yet given a descriptive account of dub poetry criticism. The reconstruction of this criticism is difficult for several reasons. Scholars have approached only selected aspects of the poetry, and critical discussions appear only briefly, scattered across short sections of large anthologies, the music press, literary magazines and academic journals. It would be erroneous to think that no scholarly work has analysed the poetry from a sophisticated critical angle. It has received some attention from academics and non-academics, which has made this study possible.<sup>99</sup> It is true, however, that a study of dub poetry from both the outside and the inside—combining recognition of the cultural context in which it emerged with a thorough understanding of its

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<sup>99</sup> See, for instance, David Austin, *Dread Poetry and Freedom*; Bartosz Wójcik, *Afro-Caribbean Poetry: Cultural Traditions (1970s-2000s)*; Jenny Sharp, ‘Cartographies of Globalisation, Technologies of Gendered Subjectivities: The Dub Poetry of Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze’, *Gender & History*, 13 (2003), pp. 440–459 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386643-012>> [11 April 2018]; Eric Doumerc, ‘La «Dub Poetry»: Évolution d'un Genre’, in *Musique et Littératures: Intertextualités*, ed. Andrée-Marie Harmat (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2002), pp. 179-185; Bousquet, ‘Dub Poetry: une Étude de l’Oralité dans les Poèmes de Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, Linton Kwesi Johnson et Benjamin Zephaniah’; John Galuska, ‘Mapping Creative Interiors: Creative Process Narratives and Individualized Workscape in the Jamaican Dub Poetry Context’ (doctoral thesis, Indiana University, 2007); Peter Manuel, *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2006); Janet DeCosmo, ‘Dub Poetry: Legacy of Roots Reggae’, *Griot*, 14 (1995), pp. 33-41 ; Peter Hitchcock, “It Dread Inna Ingan”: Linton Kwesi Johnson, Dread, and Dub Identity’, *Postmodern Culture*, 4 (1993), pp. 1-25 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27424>> [10 February 2016].

aesthetic—continues to be a long overdue. The dispersion of the existing criticism requires a careful handling of information, which is made particularly arduous by the difficulty of accessing these sources. Adding to that, the history of dub criticism exhibits an interesting phenomenon, with poets acting as both artists and critics. As opposed to the common reader's scrutiny of a text, the particular interpretations of poets who wear the double hat of critics and artists have left indelible traces that continue to mark current understanding: indeed, their theoretical writings have become part of dub poetry's literary criticism. A thorough analysis of this poetry's literary reception must thus include an examination of the artists' interests and motivations behind the poetry. It is also important to remember that dub poetry did not emerge as a movement with shared theoretical reflections that would organise that tradition around common artistic practices. Engaging with the literary world on a personal level, dub poets did not work as a collective body with identical artistic goals. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge subjectivity in the poets' retrospective views on what was going on at the time when reconstructing the history of dub poetry's criticism. With this in mind, this section provides a selection of critiques from dub poetry's early years. I chose these for two reasons. On the one hand, they demonstrate a general understanding of the organicity of dub poetry's cultural components. On the other hand, they illustrate various attempts to replace these cultural components within a larger body of poetic forms. These two types of criticism paved the way for the adoption of simplistic frameworks based on predefined categories. They contributed to the disregard of the dense cultural encounters that made dub poetry possible.

There is the lingering idea that dub poetry is somehow restricted in its artistic merits. At times, it is even viewed as superficial and easy-reading poetry. Victor Chang states:

I am not saying that this poetry does not have its value or that it should be like traditional poetry. I merely want to suggest that we cannot often expect any subtlety of approach, anything that is inward-looking, musing, quiet, reflective, tender, delicate, registering a complexity of position or feeling.<sup>100</sup>

In less negative terms, Gordon Rohlehr writes:

Dub poetry is at its worst a kind of tedious jabber to a monotonous rhythm. At its best it is the intelligent appropriation of the manipulatory techniques of the DJ for purposes of personal and communal signification.<sup>101</sup>

These quotes have obviously different attitudes towards the poetry. In the first one, Chang denounces a lack of complexity and sophisticated language, which can, I believe, be redirected to the superficiality of his own approach. Rohlehr's quote, despite an invitation to a better account of the poetry's technical innovation, points to a certain monotony. Here again, I believe that the unchallenging nature of such criticism is directly linked to a reductive understanding of dub poetry. Appropriate analytical language and a fitting framework for looking at the complexity of the poetry remain largely unexplored.

Habekost's *Verbal Riddim* is the first monograph to present a studious analysis of dub poetry. It gave a whole generation of critics a variety of crucial elements

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<sup>100</sup> Mervyn Morris, “Dub Poetry”?, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 43 (1997), pp. 1-10 (p. 6) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40654004>> [5 March 2015]. Chang's comment comes from his review of the anthology *Dub Poetry: 19 Poets from England and Jamaica*, edited by Habekost. The review appears in a 1988 issue of *Jamaica Journal*.

<sup>101</sup> Rohlehr, ‘Introduction’, p. 18.

that they extensively recycled in other studies. Written in a non-Caribbean country, *Verbal Riddim* is also a precious testimony of dub poetry's international movements and popularity. Throughout the book, Habekost establishes the poetry as part of popular culture. Although this might sound obvious today, he created a space to think generously about key notions such as low versus high art, creole and street language as languages of poetic expression and the use of folklore and storytelling in urban poetry. He also established a clear connection between griots and dub poets, as well as between music and this poetry.<sup>102</sup> His references to sound systems, DJs and the influence of reggae, and his discussion of rhythm, brought a musical awareness to the reading of dub poetry. Finally, his almost devotional admiration for politically engaged poetry gave rise to sophisticated arguments on questions of black identity and Rastafarianism. Habekost's analysis of the poets' guerrilla attitudes, resistance to authority and use of bold language had an important impact in the development of analysis focusing almost exclusively on the poetry's political side. Because of its strong stance of political resistance, it is generally described as a combination of everything from 'black consciousness, decolonization, Garveyism, Rastafarianism,

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<sup>102</sup> The parallels between the dub poet and the griot are explored by many critics. See, for instance, Beth-Sarah Wright, 'Du Poet Lekka Mi: An Exploration of Performance Poetry, Power and Identity Politics in Black Britain', in *Black British Culture and Society Culture and Society: A Text Reader*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 293-313; Pierpaolo Martino, 'Transnational Metamorphoses of African Orality: L. K. Johnson's Dub Poetry', *Journal des Africanistes*, 8 (2010), pp. 193-204  
<<https://africanistes.revues.org/2492#text>> [07 February 2017]. The London poetry show Rise of the Griot, presented by the artist ShakaRa, makes the connection obvious. The poet Kokumo uses the term "dub-griot" to show this legacy explicitly. They belong to what they call 'the griotology movement'.

Marxism/socialism to anti-colonial nationalism'.<sup>103</sup> Overall, the study's general approach, based on the articulation of the Rastafarian concept of 'Word Sound and Power', provided fundamental aspects to dub poetry criticism that have continued to unconsciously shape subsequent analyses.<sup>104</sup>

Despite *Verbal Riddim*'s uncontested contribution, the book's representation of culture is strongly essentialist, predefined by closed categories. It introduces the poetry as an unmixable mélange of white and black cultures. Poetry is black in its oral form and white in its written form. Situated between these coloured divided worlds, dub poetry is a 'creative concept [that] entails the notion of creolization'.<sup>105</sup> This form of creolisation is not a 'homogenous "cocktail mix" of two equally balanced ingredients' but 'an uneven mélange of oil and water'.<sup>106</sup> In this view, culture is defined as a combination of separated elements that are not transformed by cultural encounters.

The seminal anthology *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* is another work that had an influential impact in the history of this criticism.<sup>107</sup> It opens with a few introductory lines dedicated to dub poets. The volume's editor, Paula Burnett, writes:

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<sup>103</sup> Michael Bucknor, 'Dub Poetry as Postmodern Art Form: Self-Conscious of Critical reception', in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. Michael Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 255-265 (p. 256).

<sup>104</sup> The anthropologist John Homiak writes: 'As ontological phenomena, [words] have the power to be and to manifest what they really are. Words must be used judiciously and precisely because, in Rasta ontology, "word-sound" is power. Word-sounds, moreover, are conceptualized in a fundamentally African way as "vibrations" ... which have the power to impact directly upon the material world.' John P. Homiak, 'Dub History: Soundings on Rastafari Livity and Language', in *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, ed. Barry Chevannes (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 127-173 (p. 175).

<sup>105</sup> Habekost, p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> Habekost, pp. 1-2.

<sup>107</sup> This anthology is a large collection of Caribbean poems, from anonymous work songs of the late 1780s to poetry from the late 1980s.

Their standpoint tends to be that of the urban poor, oppressed by a prosperous establishment, and their language, like many of the reggae musicians', is influenced by Rastafarian speech. [...] They tend to employ the sonorous Rastafarian fusion of Biblical phraseology and 'I'-dominated terms to lend weight to their message, and use proverbs and allusions to popular lore, such as folk-songs and children's rhymes, as a kind of folk wisdom in support of their case. [...] They will use irony but are rarely funny; with them, laughter always has a serious edge. In the hands of a gifted poet and performer such as Michael Smith, [...] the art of oral poetry has reached a genuine maturity.<sup>108</sup>

Written in 1986, only a few years after the emergence of early albums such as Oku Onuora's *Reflection in Red* (1979), Michael Smith's *Mi Cyaan Believe It* (1982) and LKJ's *Making History* (1983), this comment shows a certain timidity and ambiguity in appreciation. It is clearly in the lineage of *Verbal Riddim*, as it recognises links to the popular, the urban poor and reggae music and acknowledges a strong political engagement. Yet, as opposed to Habekost, who sees neat distinctions between these various constitutive elements, Burnett understands the relationships amongst them as more fluid. It is important to note, however, that the anthology's organisation is based on a division of oral tradition on the one hand and written tradition on the other. In this dichotomy, dub poetry is discussed only in the oral poetry section. In a review describing this extensive anthology as the 'fruit of diligent research,' Mervyn Morris pinpoints the danger of sharply demarcating

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<sup>108</sup> Paula Burnett ed., *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 41-42.

written from oral forms of poetry.<sup>109</sup> The 1986 publication of *Voiceprint*, an anthology of oral and ‘related’ poetry from the Caribbean, came as a response to Burnett’s anthology. Edited by Stewart Brown, Rohlehr and Morris, the book quickly became a new landmark of Caribbean poetics and criticism. Rohlehr’s preface gives extensive attention to dub poetry and places the form in a transversal position between oral and written traditions. This more fluid understanding is based on the popular notion of a continuum. Already employed in linguistic study of creole languages, the continuum is a useful conceptual tool for representing the greater or lesser possession of the characteristics of two formerly inflexible categories. Against a system of either/or, *Voiceprint* is an anthology that seeks to show continuity rather than boundaries between the oral and the written:

*Voiceprint* is meant to illustrate not only the wealth and range of the West Indian oral tradition, but also the relationship between this tradition and a large body of writing which contains a certain orality even though this may not be immediately evident.<sup>110</sup>

Yet despite this book’s more organic view of culture, it still has a lingering assumption that the multifaceted aspects of the poetry are there in a rather fixed form:

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<sup>109</sup> Mervyn Morris, ‘Reviewed Work: The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English by Paula Burnett’, *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 1 (1987), pp. 73-75 (p. 73) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23019562>> [03 February 2016].

<sup>110</sup> Rohlehr, ‘Introduction’, p. 12.

Though the folk tradition of the West Indies and perhaps of most places is largely oral, the oral tradition contains both folk working class and middle class elements; both ‘black’ and ‘white’ aspects of style.<sup>111</sup>

This colour-coded approach remains the most common path of analysis in dub poetry criticism.

Finally, it is impossible to ignore the role that Kamau Brathwaite, as a poet and a critic, has played in influencing and shaping this criticism.<sup>112</sup> However, because his work has such a central place in the larger story of dub poetry, his contributions will be unpacked throughout this thesis.

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<sup>111</sup> Rohlehr, ‘Introduction’, p. 12.

<sup>112</sup> For many dub poets (particularly LKJ), his theoretical writing has influenced the criticism of dub poetry. It has shaped a particular consciousness and reception of the poetry.

## Chapter 2: A historical trajectory

### Caribbean poetics: Miss Lou, Edward Kamau Brathwaite

Dub poetry is often seen as revolutionary not only in the radical message it conveys but also in the form it uses. As Rob Partridge writes, ‘With no literary precedents to fall back on, Linton was forced to innovate form and language to fit the demands of his subject matter’.<sup>113</sup> This position is obviously problematic, as it is impossible to think of literary innovations without precedents. Yet the historical trajectory that made dub poetry’s innovations possible remains unexplored today, and this poetic tradition continues to be seen as a radical break from past artistic expression. In this chapter I will shed new light on some key moments of the literary past that contributed to the creation of a fertile ground for the development of dub poetry. We begin our consideration of this historical trajectory with the echoes of a change of aesthetic in the artistic context of Caribbean universities.

The 1970s saw a reconsideration of the relationship between the Caribbean and the British Empire, prompting the advancement of a decolonised aesthetic. In order to introduce this cultural and political shift in the arts, I examine the work of Louise Bennett (Miss Lou) and Edward Kamau Brathwaite. They are both key figures in the historical development of dub poetry as well as the larger literary

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<sup>113</sup> Rustum Kozain, ‘Contemporary English Oral Poetry by Black Poets in Great Britain and South Africa: A Comparison between Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mzwakhe Mbali’ (Master’s thesis, University of Cape Town, 1994). Original quote is from Rob Partridge’s sleeve notes on LKJ’s album Linton Kwesi Johnson. Reggae Greats. Island Records. 1985 [CD].

context that witnessed the advancement of a decolonised aesthetic.

Miss Lou played a major role in the recognition of a poetics grounded in the realities of the Caribbean. In the pre-independence context, she provided a solid ground for future exploration of a decolonised aesthetic. The recognition of her work as literature and not just entertainment opened a creative space for the development of Caribbean poetics. In the history of dub poetry, she is acknowledged by both poets and critics as an influential figure. Without too much critical thinking, she is sometimes referred to as ‘the Jamaican dub poet Louise Bennett’.<sup>114</sup> As Michael Smith explains:

I consider Louise Bennett to be the mother of the young dub poets: Linton, Oku, Mutabaruka and myself. She has really stood up against colonial values, in which it is understood that real communication would have to be in the Queen’s English. To really communicate and be understood by all, you have to communicate in the language of the oppressed and dispossessed people you’re dealing with. She elevated the language so the people can take pride in and [have] a feeling of positiveness about themselves.<sup>115</sup>

Smith’s well-known poem ‘Mi C-Yaan Believe It’, for instance, exhibits intertextuality with her work. The very first lines nicely resonate with the beginning of Miss Lou’s poem ‘Is Me’.<sup>116</sup> In the introduction to this poem published

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<sup>114</sup> Mary F. Brewer, Lynette Goddard, and Deirdre Osborne ed., *Modern and Contemporary Black British Drama* (London: Palgrave, 2015), p. 7.

<sup>115</sup> Paul Bradshaw, ‘Dub Poets - Michael Smith’. Stand up and Spit: Ranting Poetry, Sweary Poetry, Boozy Poetry. 6 July 2014. Blog. Available at <<https://standupandspit.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/dub-poets-michael-smith/>> [03 October 2016].

<sup>116</sup> Another example of intertextuality between Miss Lou and dub poetry can be found in LKJ’s ‘Sonny Lettah’, whose first few lines—‘Dear Mama / Good Day. / I hope dat wen / deze few lines reach yu, / they may find yu in di bes af helt’—echo her ‘Writing Home’: ‘Dear Mamma, how is ting / Ah hope yuh keepin well’. In a live show, LKJ shared the stage

in *Jamaican Labrish*, Miss Lou explains that it is a comment on the new confidence of Jamaican political leaders after the adoption of the 1944 Constitution. Many public figures then shared a feeling of self-importance and authority that made them brash to the point of not adhering to certain established rules of conduct. ‘Is Me’ ironically illustrates this new arrogance:

Is who da a-sey “who dat”?  
Wat a piece o’ liberty,  
Gal yuh know is who yuh talkin to?  
Teck a good look, is Me

‘Don’t you know who I am?’ is asked by people who are arrogant enough to think that the answer should be obvious. As Miss Lou writes, ‘The question—“Don’t you know who I am?”—was increasingly asked of those who failed to recognise authority in the flesh and blood. And some [of those authorities] did not even think it necessary to explain who they were. The statement—“Is me!”—had to suffice’.<sup>117</sup> Smith uses a similar humorous twist on the question of identity in ‘Mi C-Yaan Believe It’:

Sittin on the corner wid me fren  
Talkin bout tings an times  
Me hear one voice I  
“Who dat?”  
Mi I “A who dat?”  
“A who dat a I who dat  
when mi a I who dat?”

The general admiration for Miss Lou’s work is, of course, linked to the political and social context of the 1940s. For Robert Verity,

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with Miss Lou, showing another form of intertextuality, *Yes M'Dear: Miss Lou Live (1983)*. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OH6gYqrFLdQ>> [18 June 2017].

<sup>117</sup> Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish* (Jamaica: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966), p. 140.

Louise Bennett, by the authenticity of her dialect verse, had given sensitive and penetrating artistic expression to our National Character. [...] Her work has constituted an invaluable contribution to the discovery and development of an indigenous culture and her verses are valid social documents reflecting the way we think and feel and live.<sup>118</sup>

In the anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments of that time, Miss Lou represented for a whole generation of writers the assertion of a truly ‘West Indian’ identity. Yet beyond an identification with this identity, no studies have seriously considered an artistic connection between the poetics of dub and the poetic work of Miss Lou. Although there are many ways to look at this dialogue, I focus on the theatrical dimension of her work in both the text and the performance, through the use of radio programmes and recording as a space of analysis. In anticipation of the close readings of this thesis (see part 2), I will concentrate on her significant role in developing a poetry in which the content and the performance of that content have a reciprocal relationship. In other words, I argue that she developed a poetry in which the content of the text is an important characteristic of the performance of the text. In order to discuss this interdependency, I examine her presence on records and particularly on radio shows, such as the BBC’s *Caribbean Voices*. As Lloyd Brown rightly recalls:

She has performed much of her work on radio [...] and a major proportion of her poetry actually appeared for the first time on her radio shows since the

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<sup>118</sup> Mervyn Morris, ‘On Reading Louise Bennett Seriously’, in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, ed. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 194-198 (p. 195).

1940's. Consequently, publication has really been an after-thought, of sorts, in terms of her function and achievement as an artist in an oral medium.<sup>119</sup> Her participation in radio shows helped to spread a type of poetics as well as a mode of delivery that could be highly dramatized. She presented poetic texts with an easily identifiable space for the performance: her poetry was written with a strong awareness of performability. The dramatisation of the narrative structure allowed her to fully explore this high level of performability. It was the very nature of her texts that allowed her to develop a highly dramatised mode of delivery. As Denise deCaires Narain suggests, Miss Lou's work is best described as 'staging the performance of a people's voice'.<sup>120</sup> The performance *of* the text and the performance *in* the text are interdependent, influencing each other in the creation of a particular poetics. In recording her work, Miss Lou opened the door to the exploration of a poetry-in-performance where the dramatisation of the narrative content offered a space of experimentation. I argue that her mode of delivery made listening to poetry close to a theatrical experience. In chapter 6, I discuss the central place of the Jamaican School of Drama in the artistic development of Michael Smith, Oku Onuora and even Jean 'Binta' Breeze.<sup>121</sup> Nonetheless, as I emphasise there, analyses of dub poetry often dismiss the role of theatre in dub poetry's emergence. Miss Lou's exploration of the performability of her poetics showed the way to an artistic practice at the crossroads of theatre and poetry.

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<sup>119</sup> Lloyd Brown, 'The Oral Tradition: Sparrow and Louise Bennett', in *West Indian Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1984), pp. 100-118 (p. 108).

<sup>120</sup> deCaires Narain, p. 56.

<sup>121</sup> LKJ's *Voices of the Living and the Dead* is a verse play written in 1973. Performed at the Keskidee Centre, it included musical accompaniment by drum, bass guitar and flute and is now seen as a precursor to dub poetry (Habekost, p. 109).

Indeed, her career was marked by a lasting involvement with theatre. In the 1940s, she received a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. After graduating, she worked with several theatre companies both in Jamaica and in the UK. She went back to Jamaica in 1947 and was involved in setting up the little theatre movement pantomime, but financial difficulties made her go back to England. While in London, she was invited by the BBC to send greetings back to the Caribbean. Rather than using her ‘best English’ as the other students did, she spoke her everyday tongue: ‘In a radio landscape that included a number of commentators functioning in more or less Standard English, was there not room for commentary in the mother tongue of most Jamaican’, asks Mervyn Morris.<sup>122</sup> Her confidence, her pride and her unapologetic use of Jamaican patois caught the attention of the general manager of the BBC’s General Overseas Service, whose office wanted a programme with a ‘Caribbean flavour’.<sup>123</sup> She then worked on several radio programmes and made an important contribution to the BBC’s *Caribbean Voices*. Emerging at the end of World War II in London, *Caribbean Voices* was directed by Henry Swanzy, followed by V.S. Naipaul and then Edgar Mittelholzer.<sup>124</sup> It aimed to encourage Caribbean writers to have ‘more confidence

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<sup>122</sup> Mervyn Morris, *Miss Lou: Louise Bennett and Jamaican culture* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2014), p. 91.

<sup>123</sup> Morris, p. 93.

<sup>124</sup> *Caribbean Voices* was a continuation of the programme *Calling the West Indies*, which was produced primarily for West Indian servicemen by the London-based Jamaican journalist Una Marson before changing into a literary magazine. This programme ‘offered London-based servicemen from the English-speaking Caribbean the opportunity to read message of sentiment and the occasional poem over the air as one aspect of maintaining contact with relatives back home’ (Glyne A. Griffith, *The BBC and the Development of Anglophone Caribbean Literature, 1943–1958* (Albany, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 129). When Marson returned to Jamaica, the programme was put back on the air, now produced by Swanzy and known as *Caribbean Voices* (Laurence Breiner, ‘Caribbean Voices on the Air: Radio, Poetry and Nationalism in the Anglophone Caribbean’, in *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2003), pp. 93–108 (p. 96)).

in the use of raw materials – a greater use of words, style and incidents of a “truly West Indian nature”.<sup>125</sup> The selection of literature to be broadcast in the programme emphasised the importance of what Swanzy called ‘local colour’, characterised by a style close to social realism. As Swanzy noted, ‘All these prose writers are realists: they report a scene, sometimes doing little more than that. Probably that is because a radio story has to be on the short side, and pictorial’.<sup>126</sup> This call for ‘local colour’ responded to a need to connect the writers to their local place of writing, to the cultural and social realities from which they spoke: ‘We only ask for this local writing because literature, all literature, is nothing if not concrete and particular (as opposed to science which is abstract and general)’.<sup>127</sup> To fulfil this requirement, many writers used the vernacular speech of the middle class and rural life. This everyday speech helped to bring into their fictional work the specificities of their island territories.<sup>128</sup> In *Caribbean Voices*, Miss Lou’s presence was particularly noticeable. Not only was she a woman in a male-dominated programme, but her poems were written in Jamaican patois, deliberately to be performed. It is worth remembering that during her artistic life, there were still strong linguistic attitudes attached to the use of patois: it was

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<sup>125</sup> Hyacinth Simpson, ‘The BBC’s Caribbean Voices and the Making of an Oral Aesthetic in the West Indian Short Story’, *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 57 (2011), pp. 1-13 (p. 3) <<http://jsse.revues.org/1184>> [21 February 2017].

<sup>126</sup> Griffith, *The BBC and the Development of Anglophone Caribbean Literature, 1943–1958*, p. 138. Original quote in *Caribbean Voices: ‘Talk by Henry Swanzy’*. 11 January 1984. Scripts available at BBC Written Archives Center, Caversham Park, Reading, UK.

<sup>127</sup> Griffith, *The BBC and the Development of Anglophone Caribbean Literature, 1943–1958*, p. 137. Original quote in *Caribbean Voices: ‘Talk by Henry Swanzy’*. 11 January 1984. Scripts available at BBC Written Archives Center, Caversham Park, Reading, UK.

<sup>128</sup> Griffith, *The BBC and the Development of Anglophone Caribbean Literature, 1943–1958*, p. 129.

exclusively the language of humour, jokes, domestic issues.<sup>129</sup> In this climate, she was often categorised as a popular entertainer rather than a poet.<sup>130</sup> With this in mind, and continuing the chapter's argument, I assert that in the performance of her poetry, Miss Lou opened a space where the dramatisation of both content and practice became an important feature and that the dub poets continued to explore this space, not only in the performance of their poetry but also in the narrative structure of their poetics. It is precisely this relationship between the text and its dramatisation in performance that my close reading of Michael Smith's poem investigates. The role of the voice in the dramatisation of the performed text remains largely unexamined. Yet just as Miss Lou's most circulated performances happened on radio shows, some of LKJ's performed work similarly travelled through the airwaves. When he returned to Jamaica from the UK in 1973, he was interviewed and recited some of his poems on Jeremy Verity's *Poetry Now*, a Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation radio programme. As Robert Stewart explains, 'Young Jamaican poets who heard him, such as Michael Smith and Orlando Wong, now Oku Onuora, were encouraged by his voice to continue to develop the Creole performance poetry they had begun to fashion'.<sup>131</sup> The voice is a feature of the text and performance's interdependence. It is therefore an important space of analysis.

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<sup>129</sup> See, for instance, Brathwaite's comments in Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>130</sup> 'At the Commonwealth Arts Festival in London in 1965, she was still placed on the program among the folk singers, not the poets' (Breiner, 'Caribbean Voices on the Air', p. 101).

<sup>131</sup> Robert Stewart, 'Linton Kwesi Johnson: Poetry Down a Reggae Wire', *New West Indian Guide* 62 (1993), pp. 69-89 (p. 81) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41849496>> [03 May 2016]. See also LKJ's 1979 John Peel session: *Linton Kwesi Johnson (John Peel Session 1979)*. BBC Maida Vale (Studio 4). 1979. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohOBJVNp9wk>> [22 May 2017].

In radio programmes such as *Caribbean Voices*, ‘the authors oralized their written compositions by writing in a way that encouraged re-speaking the text rather than silent reading’.<sup>132</sup> When this programme came to an end in 1958, as part of the general dismantling of the British colonial apparatus, no regional radio carried on its transnational role.<sup>133</sup> Yet, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the following generations of artists continued to explore the performativity of poetic work, now through alternative media such as audio recordings and videocassettes. In an echo of Miss Lou’s struggle to valorise a certain type of poetic expression performed in Jamaican language, artistic work inspired by the performative side of oral folk culture was produced and debated across the Caribbean diaspora.

In this exploration of a decolonised aesthetic, Edward Kamau Brathwaite is another important figure who offered theoretical tools as well as practical examples. Like Miss Lou’s work, he is often discussed as an influential milestone in the development of dub poetry. He commented on this impact in an interview by Nathaniel Mackey, which is worth quoting at length:

[...] my readings and public lectures must have influenced, in some way, the development of ‘dub’. In the sixties we had Yard Theatre with Marina Omowale Maxwell in Jamaica and I was reading many of my poems with Count Ossie on drums. A lot of people who became dub poets, I think, would have been present on those occasions and therefore I think that, since I was the only person – I’m not blowing my own trumpet by any means, but I knew I was the only person

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<sup>132</sup> Simpson, ‘The BBC’s Caribbean Voices’, p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> Breiner, ‘Caribbean Voices on the Air’, p. 105.

because it was a very lonely experience – and since I was then the only person introducing drum rhythms into poetry it would have connected with them and they could have carried it on. I mean, I started with jazz and with train rhythms and so on. They then went straight to the local music, the local popular music, ska, rock steady, reggae, and they transferred their verse immediately into the sound system. But they did have a stepping stone in the kind of thing that I was doing. This is how I would see it, but there hasn't been any critical account of this.<sup>134</sup>

LKJ confirms:

In a sense what I've been doing with reggae, what I call reggae poetry is to consolidate that revolution that was started by Brathwaite in terms of the language and in terms of the aesthetics.<sup>135</sup>

Brathwaite's influence has been so important that a thorough analysis is well beyond the scope of this historical account. In anticipation of the close readings that follow, and in keeping with this chapter's focus, I introduce Brathwaite's approach to music and his concept of Nation Language as two fundamental tools with which the dub poets further explored a decolonised aesthetic.

The talk 'Jazz and the West Indian Novel', presented at a meeting of the Caribbean Artists Movement (see below) in London in 1967 and then published as three essays in the cultural journal *BIM*, shows Brathwaite's early attempt to implant a jazz aesthetic in the Caribbean context. The talk, part of his ongoing

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<sup>134</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, 'An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite', in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown (Bridgend, Wales: Poetry Wales 1995), pp. 13-33 (p. 27).

<sup>135</sup> Jason Gross, 'Interview: Linton Kwesi Johnson'. Perfect Sound Forever: Online Music Magazine. January 1997. Available at <<http://www.furious.com/perfect/lkj.html>>.

search for a ‘truly Caribbean aesthetic’, introduced music as a symbolic medium for a counter-hegemonic discourse. As he explained, ‘Words are not music, but the combination of poetry and music is seen as a liberating aesthetic from colonial subordination, from the colonial structure’.<sup>136</sup> In a Caribbean context of colonial domination, music became a precious tool to define the relationship between an imposed structure and a true expression of Caribbean reality. As Rohler notes in the introduction to *Voiceprint*:

Music, because it has been the means of preserving linkages between the Caribbean and non European sensibility, has become the container of a wealth of alternative rhythms, a few of which have begun to inform the poetry of the Caribbean.<sup>137</sup>

In Brathwaite’s early phase of opening new possibilities of expression through music, the concept of dissonance in jazz allowed him to imagine a literary tradition that surpassed the narrow horizons of colonial expectations. Jazz could be used as a theoretical medium to conceptualise a literary practice ‘quite outside the curriculum’.<sup>138</sup> This theorisation of a counter-hegemonic aesthetic might well be linked to an episode of his teenage years. While students at the elite Harrison College in Barbados, he and some of his friends presented a jazz programme on a local radio station. The audience reacted strongly to the bebop sound of Dizzy, Bird and Monk : ‘the people flooded the station with phone calls demanding the

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<sup>136</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, ‘Extracts from the talk on ‘The West Indian Jazz Novel’. Scripts available in the archives of the George Padmore Institute, London. The talk was delivered at the second Caribbean Artists Movement meeting, held at Orlando Patterson’s home.

<sup>137</sup> Rohlehr, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

<sup>138</sup> Donette A. Francis, “‘Travelling Miles’: Jazz in the Making of a West Indian Intellectual”, in *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Annie Paul (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2007), pp. 142-151 (p. 145).

incarceration of the perpetrators, the, as they saw us, *cultural traitors*.<sup>139</sup>

Although this is an anecdotal episode, it might indeed be connected to Brathwaite's inspiration to use jazz as a theoretical framework for a literary practice that is outside the norms of acceptability. As he explained, in proposing a jazz aesthetic for the West Indies he was 'trying to outline an alternative to the English Romantic/Victorian cultural tradition that operated among and on us'.<sup>140</sup> Jazz symbolises a dissonant voice that is nonetheless rooted in a specific tradition.<sup>141</sup>

It is important to understand Brathwaite's use of jazz as a first attempt to discuss and explore an alternative aesthetic in a postcolonial Caribbean context. Later, it was in the sound of what he calls 'native music' that he found creative inspiration: 'As I get to know more about the Caribbean the emphasis shifts from jazz to the Caribbean, to calypso, to reggae, to our folk music, to the (religious) music connected to the *honour* [voodoo temple]'.<sup>142</sup> The variety of his musical interests shows how a poetics of musicality goes beyond the singularity of a particular musical genre. His admiration for the blues and jazz poetry of the African-American tradition, as well as his theorisation of a jazz aesthetic adapted to a Caribbean context, helped to promote the visibility of a generation of poets whose works were concerned with music.<sup>143</sup> Brathwaite himself continued to

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<sup>139</sup> Mackey, p. 29.

<sup>140</sup> Louis James, 'Brathwaite and Jazz', in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown (Bridgend, Wales, 1995), pp. 62-74 (p. 62).

<sup>141</sup> For Brathwaite, a jazz aesthetic allows him to be 'rooted in a Eurocentric educational system yet not producing Shakespearean poetry' (Francis, p. 145). Jazz's musical practice is based on a creative tension that departs from while maintaining, resembling and building upon given materials: dissonance within a tradition.

<sup>142</sup> Mackey, p. 149.

<sup>143</sup> Donette Francis explains that Brathwaite's collection of poems *Black and Blues* was written after his stay in England, where he experienced 'race as dissonance' (Francis, p.

explore a literary sensibility that mixed poetry and music in creative collaboration. His presence in a diasporic Caribbean literary context functioned as a bridge between the two sides of the Atlantic, where poetry shaped by the creative power of music could echo other experimentations.

His use of jazz and native music was a response to other attempts to find critical and creative tools in music. Amongst writers of the black Atlantic, music has been a catalyst for the development of a distinctive aesthetic that expresses, affirms and holds together the particularities of black experience. As Christopher Winks notes, music works as a catalyst by providing a ‘mobile continuum of identities, aesthetics, and sounds’.<sup>144</sup> Writers share a recognition of this continuum but engage with it differently, bringing a variety of approaches to the conceptualisation of the critical and creative tools offered by music. In the context of the United States specifically, Ralph Ellison and Amiri Baraka, born Leroi Jones, played an important role in establishing a literary tradition that critically and creatively engages with music. It is not possible to give an in-depth summary of their views here: their complex relationships with music, which lasted throughout their careers, goes beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet in order to understand Brathwaite’s musical inspiration, from jazz to native genres, as part of this mobile continuum, I will briefly provide the gist of Jones’s early views, expressed in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. Ellison’s critical response is brought into

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148). This collection is about his experience of double consciousness and echoes Louis Armstrong’s lyrics in ‘Black and Blues’. Many of its poems are also ‘influenced by reggae and have been read to reggae’ (Mackey, p. 29).

<sup>144</sup> Christopher Winks, ‘Amiri Baraka: Phenomenologist of Jazz Spirit’, in *Black Music, Black Poetry: Blues and Jazz’s Impact on African American Versification*, ed. Gordon E. Thompson (New York: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 99–109 (p. 99).

the conversation to illustrate variations in this continuum. It is also discussed here to show how, despite having different approaches, writers could nonetheless meet around a shared understanding. Their approach to music is ‘based on the premise that black music stands as the strongest repository and representation of black American consciousness and that black poetry, by using such music as a model of sorts, reflects the influence of an authentic African American aesthetic rooted in black musical forms’.<sup>145</sup>

*Blues People* was the first African-American-written book dedicated to a groundbreaking analytical and historical study of jazz and blues. It tells the history of African-American people through a musical journey, from work songs and spirituals to blues and jazz:

As I began to get into the history of the music, I found that this was impossible without, at the same time, getting deeper into the history of the people. [...] Music was an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, blown, beaten, scatted, corollary confirmation of the history.<sup>146</sup>

The monograph uses a study of musical transformations through time to chronicle the progression from the first African slaves to the modern situation of the black man in a white America. From this sociological angle, music is primarily seen as deriving from or expressing social conditions. As it reflects the living conditions of blacks in the United States, music becomes a fitting space for conceptualising and developing a distinctive aesthetic that truly expresses the lives and experiences of

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<sup>145</sup> Gordon E. Thompson, ‘Introduction: Lyrical Aesthetics in African American Poetry’, in *Black Music, Black Poetry: Blues and Jazz’s Impact on African American Versification*, ed. Gordon E. Thompson (New York: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 1-18 (p. 12).

<sup>146</sup> Leroi Jones, *Blues People : Negro Music in White America* (New York: New Happer Perennial, 1963), p. ix.

African-Americans. The book is an illustration of the continuum where sound structure, social structure and the development of an aesthetic are constantly entangled. As Baraka himself explains, *Blues People* is a ‘beginning text’: an early attempt to aesthetically understand the experience of African-American people in white America through music.<sup>147</sup> The book is preoccupied with the representation of this aesthetic as authentic blackness, which it opposes to the “whitening” process imposed by the black bourgeoisie on indigenous forms'.<sup>148</sup> For Baraka, the blues illustrates this authentic blackness: it is the essence of an African-American culture, based on an African culture, and a space where the true nature of black experience unfolds. Consequently, it is there that Baraka places an aesthetic that truly corresponds to the experience of black people in the United States. The blues becomes a catalyst for the establishment of an aesthetic based on a strong dichotomy between white and black culture. This approach is not concerned with the possibility of reciprocal influences in an American culture that is fundamentally plural. It does, however, echo a larger conversation around the search in the 1960s for a black aesthetic rooted in authentic blackness, in Africanist survival.<sup>149</sup> For Baraka, the blues is ‘first a feeling, a sense-Knowledge. A being, not a theory – the feeling is the form and vice versa’.<sup>150</sup>

Baraka’s view of music as a conceptual space in which to think of the texture of

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<sup>147</sup> Jones, p. xi.

<sup>148</sup> Winks, p. 104.

<sup>149</sup> On the importance of an authentic blackness in the development of a black aesthetic in the 1960s, see Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: Virginia University Press, 2010).

<sup>150</sup> Amiri Baraka, ‘The “Blues Aesthetic” and the “Black Aesthetic”: Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture’, in *Digging: the Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 19-27 (p. 24).

an American culture divided into white and black has not been uncontested. Indeed, Ellison's critical response to this argument is often referenced as an illustration of a debate bringing different views into this mobile continuum. In *Shadow and Act*, a collection of essays and interviews, he writes: 'The tremendous burden of sociology, which Jones would place upon this body of music, is enough to give even the blues the blues'.<sup>151</sup> For him, Baraka's position fails to recognise the intertwining of the different elements on which the experience of the United States is built. Black culture cannot be separated or isolated from the rest of American culture. These opposing views are complex and are of course intimately linked to their holders' personal and political positions within their society, and more precisely to their relation to the colour line that divides it. Each argument had a great impact on the development of the critical and creative tools offered by their approaches to music. Jerry Watts, in his study of Baraka's life and work, sums up their respective positions as follows:

For Ellison, the blues and jazz were conspicuously American art forms. In Jones's mind, the blues and jazz were primarily African, albeit continually filtered through American culture. Ellison viewed the music as an indication of the Negro's fundamental American identity. Jones saw the music as an indication of the Negro's status as a cultural outsider in America.<sup>152</sup>

This music, for Ellison, signifies achievement of a self-determined identity. It is the expression of a unique and individual voice.<sup>153</sup> Despite their theorisation of

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<sup>151</sup> Ralph Ellison, 'Shadow and Act (1964)', in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), pp. 47-328 (p. 279).

<sup>152</sup> Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 119.

<sup>153</sup> Thompson, p. 99.

different symbols, images and concepts, both writers recognise music as a space to think about the cultural relationships that slavery and its aftermath brought into the texture of American society. Their divergent points of view necessitate a better understanding of their political positions. However, here I mention Ellison's answer only to illustrate how the use of music in the elaboration of critical and creative tools does not happen in isolation. Instead, although these two writers are often used to demonstrate opposing views, they function as a concrete example of the variety of perspectives on this mobile continuum. Baraka explains:

It seems possible to me that some kind of graph could be set up using samplings of Negro music proper to whatever moment of the Negro's social history was selected, and that in each groupings of songs a certain frequency of reference could pretty well determine his social, economic, and psychological states at that particular period.<sup>154</sup>

The above quote could well have been written by Ellison. Between the two, there is indeed a common assertion of music's power to communicate experience aesthetically, as well to open possibilities of expressing theoretical concepts. It is in the multiplicity of theoretical and creative answers produced by this variety of perspectives that I want to situate Brathwaite's jazz aesthetic: a web of answers, of perspectives that respond to one another with variations. His use of jazz, and later what he calls native music, needs to be placed within this conversational space where the continuum is debated, transformed and adapted to the needs of individual writers. In the context of the Caribbean, Brathwaite played an

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<sup>154</sup> Jones, p. 65.

instrumental role in introducing to both theory and practice the use of music as a muse for the development of an authentic poetic aesthetic. The exploration of this authentic aesthetic is another attempt to create an alternative aesthetic expressing a decolonised poetics. In the continuation of this search for a decolonised aesthetic, the elaboration of the concept of Nation Language became another tool that influenced the development of dub poetry.

Brathwaite introduced the term ‘Nation Language’ in a lecture he gave at Carifesta in Jamaica in 1976 and again at Harvard in 1979 under the title ‘History of the Voice’. New Beacon Books then published it in 1984 as the theoretical essay *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*. The term is used as an alternative for ‘dialect’ and refers to the language spoken by ‘the slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors’.<sup>155</sup> It is ‘English and African at the same time’ but ‘more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean’.<sup>156</sup> ‘The actual rhythm and the syllables, the very software,’ of Nation Language testify to the presence of Africa in the present reality of the Caribbean.<sup>157</sup> The term is marked by a certain fuzziness. As Nadi Edwards explains, Nation Language ‘is also conceptualized in terms of racial and cultural solidarity that excludes non-African elements’.<sup>158</sup> It might be English in its lexicon, but its ‘contours, its rhythm and

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<sup>155</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, pp. 5-6. He explains that ‘dialect is “inferior English”. Dialect is the language used when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people’s dignity is distorted through their language and the descriptions which the dialect gave them’ (Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 13).

<sup>156</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 13.

<sup>157</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 9.

<sup>158</sup> Nadi Edwards, ‘Introduction’, in *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Annie Paul (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2007), pp. 1-36 (p. 16).

timbre, its sound explosions' are not English.<sup>159</sup> Throughout Brathwaite's essay, the idea is perhaps best understood as a creative attitude around the exploration of a decolonised poetics. It is a statement on the traces left by the slaves who, despite being excluded from the colonial print culture, refused to remain voiceless.<sup>160</sup> Indeed, the concept of Nation Language emphasises the need for the expression of a Caribbean experience. With its strong attention to the performative, the oral and the spoken word, Nation Language is a response to imposed norms of colonial literary canons. It is a language infused with the noises, the sounds, the shouts of people living in the Caribbean, where the echoes of the African past can still be heard.

This discussion of African influence on contemporary forms of cultural expression elsewhere enters a broader field of study on the trace and the place of the African presence that continues to mark today's black Atlantic cultural productions. Identification and analysis of the deep synthesis of African and Europe influences in these New World products provides, as Robert Farris Thompson notes in the introduction to *Flash of the Spirit*, 'a measure of the achievement of African civilizations in transition to the West'.<sup>161</sup> Historically, such contributions have been denied, as he further comments: 'Until very recently the United States was held to be virtually devoid of African-influenced visual traditions'.<sup>162</sup> Thompson wrote his book in 1983, but the need to recognise and

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<sup>159</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 13.

<sup>160</sup> Supriya Nair, 'Creolization, Orality, and Nation Language in the Caribbean', in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 236-251 (p. 249).

<sup>161</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (Vintage Books Edition, 1983), p. xvii.

<sup>162</sup> Thompson, p. 128.

understand African-influenced traditions remains important in current black Atlantic studies. The rich, interwoven cultural elements that have come from Mother Africa and are still alive in the artistic practice of dub poetry merit a more refined discussion than that offered in the present study. For instance, my comment on the limited understanding of dub poetry's oral aspect as derived from African traditions is a shortcut remark that would benefit from more analysis. Similarly, my identification of rhythm as an often reductive avenue for connecting dub poetry to African music is also itself reductive. More elaborate analyses are required to balance this view.<sup>163</sup> There is a need for future work to fully explore and appreciate the presence of African aesthetics in the art of the dub poet.

To return to Brathwaite, he explains that in the colonisation of the Caribbean, the use of English imposed upon its subjects not only a language but also a form of expression that corresponded to an English experience. In other words, the use of English shaped people's reality according to a colonial mindset. English language, therefore, is not compatible with the expression of a Caribbean experience. Although the search for alternative poetic expression has seen successes, a colonial presence persists.<sup>164</sup> In Standard English, poets 'haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience', Brathwaite notes.<sup>165</sup> With its sounds, symbols, syntax, the actual speech of the people, the contour of its words, Nation Language aesthetically

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<sup>163</sup> See 'Previous Approaches' in the section 'Notes on Method' and the beginning of chapter 4.

<sup>164</sup> Walt Whitman 'attacked' the pentameter with his 'cosmic movement, a larger movement of sound', and Marianne Moore with her 'syllabics'. Anthony Hinkson catches 'the foreboding of the hurricane', but 'basically the pentameter remained' (Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, pp. 10-11).

<sup>165</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 8.

captures a Caribbean experience that carries the mark of an African presence.

In the context of Caribbean literature, both Miss Lou and Brathwaite played a major role as pioneers of an aesthetic search directed towards the exploration of a decolonised poetics. They sought poetic expression grounded in the reality of Caribbean life, close to the people's experience, rather than following the dictates of colonial canons. The exploration of a Caribbean aesthetic continues to be seen as a fundamental aspect of artistic work throughout the Caribbean diaspora. In the UK, people from the Caribbean community gathered to continue thinking about and conceptualising a truly Caribbean aesthetic, which had started on the other side of the Atlantic. The need to express a Caribbean aesthetic was strongly felt in a European context that did not recognise the presence of Caribbean artists. Thus it was in 1966 that John La Rose, Kamau Brathwaite and Andrew Salkey created the Caribbean Artists Movement.

### **The Caribbean Artists Movement**

The Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) emerged in response to the need to clarify the Caribbean presence in England on both a physical and a literary level. It offered a space where artistic and political concerns surrounding art, literature and everyday experiences could be addressed. The specificity of the CAM's mission allowed for the exploration of a Caribbean aesthetic that was connected not only to a Caribbean reality but also to a British one. Indeed, pointing to the isolation of mainstream Europe, Brathwaite explained the motivations behind the newly launched movement in a 1968 article:

I didn't see any West Indian writers, painters and only a very few actors (and these in stereotyped parts) on British Television. [...] I was not hearing their voices or the sound of their work on radio. They didn't seem to be participating in the literary and arts pages of the newspapers and magazines that were concerned with these things in this country.<sup>166</sup>

In contrast to the previous generation, who had spent most of their lives in the Caribbean, this one had a different relationship with England. Having either been born in Britain or moved there at an early age, they did not express the desire to 'go back home' and thus developed a different message. The CAM was a response to their need for a British–West Indian cultural base in London and was built on a strong sense of community.<sup>167</sup> Debates within this new generation were now to be linked to the members' emerging cultural identity.

Being fully engaged in local life, the CAM's members were looking for a new conceptualisation of art and practice that would parallel their everyday political struggles and local commitments.<sup>168</sup> Art needed to describe, echo, reflect and shape their everyday situation. In a seminal paper introducing this turn as a revolution in the arts in 1969, Marina Maxwell, a writer and dramatist from the Yard Theatre, explained that this 'new Caribbean aesthetic' had to draw artistic values that would 'satisfy their cultural, spiritual and political needs' from the

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<sup>166</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'The Caribbean Artists Movement', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 14 (1968), pp. 57-59 (p. 57) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.1968.11828978>> [15 May 2017].

<sup>167</sup> Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966–1972: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: New Beacon Books, 1992), p. 85.

<sup>168</sup> In 1978, LKJ's famous poem 'It Dread inna Ingla' continued to echo this new cultural identity. Reflecting this same determination to make England home, it reads: 'Maggi Tatcha on di go / wid a racist show / but a she haffi go kaw / rite now /African / Asian / West Indian / an Black British / Stan firm inna Ingla' (LKJ, 'It Dread inna Ingla').

reality of a ‘black lifestyle’.<sup>169</sup> Strongly influenced by contemporary theatrical productions in the USA, she wrote with excitement and admiration that, like West Indians, they similarly viewed this black lifestyle as the central element of black ideas.<sup>170</sup> While identifying new values and criteria in the organisation of their new Caribbean aesthetic, members of the movement insisted on the reconnection of art to their everyday reality as a pivotal concept. As a result, the CAM functioned as a co-operative space where ideas could be shared not only within an artistic community but also amongst the ‘ordinary people’.<sup>171</sup> Indeed, as opposed to the upper middle class, who identified with European values in which there was no place for people of colour, ordinary people represented the real black lifestyle. As the question of ‘Who does art really represent?’ circulated, artists needed to stand by the ‘ordinary people’. It was to show this solidarity that the CAM decided to move its activities closer to the working-class populations in Brixton and Ladbroke Grove.

Although the necessity of addressing local realities made the CAM possible, the movement also stayed faithful to its central role as a connecting space for the Caribbean diaspora on both sides of the Atlantic. From the start, it sought a transnational identity, promoting and developing local artists and distributing new books, magazines and journals to help its members to stay up-to-date with the

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<sup>169</sup> Marina Maxwell, ‘Toward a Revolution in the Art’, *Caribbean Artists Movement Newsletter*, 10 (April-June 1969), pp. 1-13 . This is not the historic transcript. The published text appears in *Savacou* 2 (September 1970). The transcript used here can be found in the archives of the George Padmore Institute, London.

<sup>170</sup> In this paper, she refers particularly to Baraka’s black theatre.

<sup>171</sup> Walmsley, p. 58.

latest news, political debates and positions from both homelands.<sup>172</sup> The CAM influenced the growth of other organisations and artistic movements, such as the Creative Arts Centre and the New World Group.<sup>173</sup>

In parallel to this transnational dimension, it is important to recontextualise the last years of the movement as being fully engaged with a larger context of black radicalisation. Malcolm X's 1964-65 visit to London, followed by Stokely Carmichael's influential 1967 visit, helped to radicalise a lot of black people, having a lasting influence and a 'tremendous impact on the burgeoning black youth movement' in England.<sup>174</sup> Organisations such as Black Unity, the Freedom Party and the Black Panther Party used the US Black Power philosophy as a stimulating model:

It [Black Power] has no one *specific* meaning. It is rather a kind of feeling – a kind of emotional response to one's history. ... Like all good theories, it can ultimately be defined only in action – in movement. Essentially, this is what the "New Breed"<sup>175</sup> is doing – defining itself through actions, be they artistic or political.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> *Savacou* was 'the voice of the Caribbean Artists Movement' in printed form (Walmsley, p. 200). This journal became a literary vehicle for spreading the CAM's activities in Britain, in the Caribbean and around the world.

<sup>173</sup> The Creative Arts Centre (CAC) was an institution created at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in 1968. Although Brathwaite praised it, he also feared that its arts programme would not respond to the needs of the community at large if it stayed within the university (Stephen Voyce, *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture* (Canada: University of Toronto Press 2013, 2013), p. 199). The New World Group, established in Guyana in 1963, was a pan-Caribbean organisation that, unlike the CAM, was mainly created by political scientists, economists and sociologists (Voyce, p. 158).

<sup>174</sup> Walmsley, p. 119.

<sup>175</sup> 'New Breed' describes the new black men and women who, as opposed to the previous generation of black Americans, expressed 'a willingness to act. They are hostile and restless, ripe for militant black leadership' (Jones, p. 198).

<sup>176</sup> Larry Neal, 'And Shine Swam On', in *Black Fire: an Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, ed. Leroi Jones and Larry Neal (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1968), pp. 637-657 (p. 646).

Moreover, Walter Rodney's banishment from Jamaica in 1968 and the subsequent riots, followed by different manifestations showing solidarity, also contributed to black radicalisation and the idea of black empowerment in the Caribbean.<sup>177</sup> Across the black Atlantic, the alliance of Black Power with labour and Rastafarian politics started to strengthen a global consciousness.<sup>178</sup> Although different opinions of Black Power emerged within the CAM, it still stimulated the arrival of the 'angry boys' generation.<sup>179</sup> Young poets such as Sebastian Clarke, Frank John, Donald Hinds, Tony Matthews, Basil Smith and June C. Doiley responded well to the new Caribbean aesthetic as their voices, speaking from the level of ordinary people, were 'down to earth'.<sup>180</sup> Influenced by the guerrilla attitude of many radical organisations, this rebel generation shaped its creativity using similarly black radical poetics.<sup>181</sup> The publications of the CAM magazine *Savacou 3/4* and the collection of poems and short stories *One Love* came as two landmark moments of this new, radicalised poetic expression.

*Savacou 3/4 New Writing* is an anthology of poems edited by Brathwaite,

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<sup>177</sup> On these developments, see Anthony Payne, 'The Rodney Riots in Jamaica: The Background and Significance of the Events of October 1968', *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 21 (1983), pp. 158-174  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14662048308447428>> [10 November 2016].

<sup>178</sup> Rob Waters, 'Henry Swanzy, Sartre's Zombie? Black Power and the Transformation of the Caribbean Artists Movement', in *Cultures of Decolonisation: Transnational Productions and Practices, 1945-70*, ed. Ruth Craggs and Claire Wintle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 67-85 (p. 75).

<sup>179</sup> After a meeting with Carmichael, Brathwaite stated: "I thought it was an interesting and stimulating session [...] I was just not at all happy about the bad-mannered element that crept in" (Walmsley, p. 119).

<sup>180</sup> Walmsley, p. 224.

<sup>181</sup> 'One Love exposed many readers in Britain for the first time to the literary ferment and growth of black consciousness in Jamaica in the wake of Walter Rodney, and to the new voices of urban youth, of Rastafarians, and of women' (Walmsley, p. 296). *One Love* is further discussed later in this chapter.

Kenneth Ramchand and Andrew Salkey.<sup>182</sup> Centred on the use of vernacular oral poetics, it is a ‘synthesis of diverse verbal and expressive genres, speech and writing, performance and reading/writing, sound and print, popular musical forms and scribal conventions’.<sup>183</sup> One of its initial impulses was to recognise the value beyond the immediate circumstances of the performance as part of the aesthetic of Caribbean literature. Alongside the prose of established figures such as George Lamming and John Hearne, as well as the poetry of Mervyn Morris and Dennis Scott, John Figueroa and Derek Walcott, is the work of an overtly radical generation of young Jamaican and Rastafarian poets, as mentioned above, rooted in oral and performed poetry.<sup>184</sup> This 1971 issue of *Savacou* followed on from the conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) held in 1970.<sup>185</sup> Hosted by the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, this conference had as its central theme the function of the writer in Caribbean literature. It questioned ‘the burdens of the past, of the metropole, of inherited aesthetic standards’ in the advancement of literary work written to be performed. The conference also discussed poetry as a literary practice circulating amongst ordinary people and written in the language of everyday life. The oral dimension of poetry became an aesthetic code of immediacy and accessibility that reflected a different relationship between the audience and the artist. Responding to this

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<sup>182</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Kenneth Ramchand, and Andrew Salkey ed., *Savacou 3/4 New Writing 1970* (Kingston and London: Caribbean Artists Movement, 1971).

<sup>183</sup> Norval Edwards, ‘The Foundational Generation: From the Beacon to Savacou’, in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, ed. Alison Donnell and Welsh Sarah Lawson (London: Routledge, 1996) (p. 121).

<sup>184</sup> This generation is referred to as the ‘angry boys’ in the previous paragraph.

<sup>185</sup> Laurence Breiner, ‘How to Behave on Paper: The Savacou Debate’, *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 6 (1993), pp. 1-10 (p. 7) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23019635>> [09 September 2017].

literary context, *Savacou 3/4* explored the complexity of these new aesthetic codes. The transcription of a text-in-performance became a central element of discussion. The selection of poems in this anthology illustrated debates about how and what should be printed in order to convey a poem's performative dimension.<sup>186</sup>

This collection is particularly well-remembered because it presented for the first time the poem 'Mabruk'. Written by the Rastafarian poet Bongo Jerry, this poem is often assimilated to the tradition of dub poetry and referred to as a Nation Language poem by Brathwaite, a reggae poem by Kwame Dawes in the introduction to *Wheel and Come Again* and even a dub poem in Laurence Breiner's contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*.<sup>187</sup> 'Mabruk' played a significant role in the poetic development of dub poetry. LKJ's collection *Dread Beat & Blood* opens with a quote from the poem, suggesting a form of intertextuality: 'Ever now communicate, for now I and I come to recreate sight, sounds and meaning to measure the feeling of BLACK HEARTS, alone'.<sup>188</sup> Regardless of its different classifications, 'Mabruk' functions as a fundamental text opening the way for the exploration of radical voices. The poem unveils a playing field for the next generation of poets.

The poem is a call for a black awakening. Following the rhetoric of Rastafarianism, there is at its core a strong affirmation of a black consciousness.

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<sup>186</sup> Breiner, 'How to Behave', p. 2.

<sup>187</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*; Kwame Dawes ed., *Wheel and Come Again: An Anthology of Reggae Poetry* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1998); Laurence Breiner, 'Postcolonial Caribbean Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, ed. Jahan Ramazani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 19-30 (p. 25).

<sup>188</sup> Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood*, p. 6.

'Mabrak' means 'black lightning', which brings black consciousness out of darkness. This poem is

a black message  
for black hearts to feel.

This black consciousness is achieved 'not just by washing out the straightening and wearing dashiki t'ing'. Instead, it is by 'straightening' the tongue—in other words, using a more appropriate type of language—that this black awakening can be achieved:

#### MOSTOFTHESTRAIGHTENINGISINTHETONGUE

Speech is an important aspect of this awakening. This poem is indeed the activation of 'BLACK SPEECH', exploring the subversive linguistic practice of dread or rasta talk. Often understood as the language of the Rastafari, dread talk, as Velma Pollard explains in her oft-cited study *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari*, is an adjustment of both content and form of 'the languages of the Jamaican people to suit their religious, philosophical, social and economic concerns as people speaking from "under"'.<sup>189</sup> Intimately tied to a political and cultural agenda, dread talk inspired many youths of the rebellious generation of

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<sup>189</sup> Velma Pollard, *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari* (Jamaica: Canoe Press, 1994), p. xi. This adjustment of semantic-phonological meaning to accommodate a particular way of seeing life can be illustrated with some common examples. The word 'oppress', for instance, becomes 'downpress' because 'op' is phonetically the same as 'up', clashing with the meaning of the word 'oppress.' Indeed, if one is being (op)pressed down by the injustice and marginalising forces of Babylon, this pressure is inconsistent with the phonetic pre-fix 'up' of 'oppress'. Other examples of this adjustment can be found in words such as 'politics', changed to 'politricks' to express corruption in politics, and 'understand', changed to 'overstand' to suggest control over the action of knowing. This deconstruction of the dominant language to find a different system of reflection is not limited to the Rastafarian philosophy of Word Sound and Power. Sherry Brennan, in her essay on Amiri Baraka, notes: 'one must re-order and reorganize the sound and language itself in such a way that equivalence cannot be restored, such that the new sound inheres in the world otherwise'. Vettorato, p. 620. Original quote in Sherry Brennan, 'On the Sound of Water: Amiri Baraka's "Black Art"', *African American Review*, 37 (2003), pp. 299-311 (p. 307) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1512315>> [07 May 2017].

which the dub poets were part. Dread talk has a subversive dimension that is shaped by Rastafarianism's anti-establishment, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist vision. This combines with its restorative dimension in the use of linguistic tricks to subvert the language, which it thus infuses with a political consciousness. Dread talk denounces the confusion found in Standard English, the double meaning hiding behind the language. Standard English—the language of the coloniser—is seen as deluding black people with double talk, with turning things around. In 'Mabruk', this subversive linguistic practice, used to adapt the coloniser's language, brings a ludic dimension into the poetics. Like other vernacular linguistic practice, language is a playground. This ludic dimension found throughout the poem, and at the heart of dread talk, is evidence of the active participation of the vernacular.<sup>190</sup> In this approach, the poet deconstructs and reconstructs words to play with semantic meanings. The poem rearranges words and changes names in order to be in line with a black consciousness:

Ever now communicate – for now I and I come to recreate:  
Sight sounds and meaning to measure the feeling  
Of BLACK HEARTS – alone –

MABRAK: frightening  
MABRAK: black lightning

In this linguistic reappropriation, the re-arranging of the letters in the word 'SAR',

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<sup>190</sup> The ludic dimension of language is a key characteristic of black talk, rasta talk and vernacular poetics. See, for instance, the humour, riddles, jokes and word games in works by Caribbean writers who use the language of the everyday (Roger Abrahams, *The Man-Of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). In the introduction to *Voiceprint* Rohler also mentions this dimension as a key characteristic of oral poetry and other poetry that takes inspiration from the oral and popular culture of the everyday (Rohlehr, 'Introduction', pp. 1-10). In the United States, the dozens, the tricksters and the signifying monkey also testify to the popular practice of using language as a playground (Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey : A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

for instance, which is, in fact, the Jamaican pronunciation of ‘sir’, brings to the surface the hidden word ‘RAS’. The presence of ‘Ras’, the short version of ‘Rastafari’, in the everyday word ‘sir’ has been corrupted by ‘the wrongs and brain-whitening’ of Standard English. The language of Babylon brings linguistic confusion that

left black people in a situation  
where education  
mek plenty African afraid, ashamed, unable to choose  
(and use)  
BLACK POWA. (Strange Tongue).

The poem, through its call for BLACK SPEECH and black consciousness, is also an affirmation of ‘BLACK POWA’. It recognises, as well as reconnects with, African roots:

BLACK HOUSE STAND FIRM: for somewhere under ITYOPIA rainbow,  
AFRICA WAITING FOR I.

The rich diversity of the layout suggests a variety of voices, moving between different tones and speeds. The organisation of words, fonts and punctuation similarly hints at the different voices used to enrich a performance. Parentheses in the text suggest the presence of side comments, functioning like stage directions. This linguistic manipulation of the poetics reflects a language policy shared amongst a large community of young poets. Already identified as ‘the rebel generation’, they explored the possibilities of linguistic reappropriation in colonial language. In this practice, ‘Mabrak’ is an important text for its linguistic emancipation through subversive re-creation and rearrangement.

Although ‘Mabrak’ was first published in an anthology that problematised the relationship between the page and the performance, it lacks an authorised

performed version: there is no commercial recording, and Breiner notes that Bongo Jerry ‘discourages any circulation of the few bootleg recordings that existed’.<sup>191</sup> Today, the text functions as a surrogate for the performance. The poem’s typography is not an accurate notation of the performance. As it can be interpreted freely, the written version uses the visual as a type of metaphor for the poem-in-performance. Although there is no attempt to transcribe the performance in the text, the poet nonetheless uses the tools of written conventions to stimulate the reader’s imagination of the poem off the page. As already mentioned, ‘Mabruk’ is also a literary example that uses rasta talk, bringing this vernacular practice into a written work. It is important to understand this identification with the vernacular in a context beyond the CAM and the *Savacou* debate: indeed, the ideological motivation was shared across the black Atlantic. In the nationalist period of the 1960s, the self-declarations of black people were accompanied by the re-evaluation of literary norms. The vernacular was a space for carrying out this re-evaluation, and consequently, black speech became a poetic reference for many writers of that period.<sup>192</sup> While rejecting the idea of universalism in literary criticism, the literary critic Henry Louis Gates shows a similar concern:

We as critics must turn to our own peculiarly black structures of thought and feeling to develop our own languages of criticism. We must do so by drawing on the black vernacular, the language we use to speak to each other when no

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<sup>191</sup> Breiner, ‘How to Behave’, p. 8.

<sup>192</sup> See, for instance, Stephen Henderson ed., *Understanding the New Black Poetry, Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), pp. 25-38.

outsiders are around. Unless we look to the vernacular to ground our theories and modes of reading, we will surely [...] remain alienated [...] or masked.<sup>193</sup>

In the various sociopolitical contexts that witnessed cultural emancipation, the shift to a vernacular poetics was a shared response to this symbolic re-evaluation of the people's language. It was a strategic move to find an authentic voice, part of the nationalistic quest for self-determination in the post-independence context of the 1960s.<sup>194</sup> Many literary examples of this revolutionary time are indeed carved out of a creative commitment to the grassroots, the vernacular, as there was a shared desire for the underclass to participate in the process of poetics formation. 'Mabruk' is part of this artistic quest. Its publication in *Savacou 3/4* was an important moment in the history of dub poetry because the poem became a concrete example that opened the conversation on the use of the vernacular as a source of inspiration, expressed here in the linguistic practice of dread talk, in a literary work written to be published.

*One Love*, a collection of poems and short stories, the second landmark publication of the CAM, is another illustration of this newly radicalised voice.<sup>195</sup> Salkey's introduction explains how black radical poetics manifested themselves on a literary level:

It [*One Love*] has political meaning, because it defines and illustrates the waiting power of Blackness in our Caribbean. It is of superlative literary merit, because

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<sup>193</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 82-83.

<sup>194</sup> A good example of this linguistic shift outside the Caribbean is the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who gave up English for Gikuyu as a deliberate political act.

<sup>195</sup> For an insightful review of this collection, see Sylvia Wynter, 'One Love — Rhetoric or Reality? — Aspects of Afro-Jamaicanism', *Caribbean Studies*, 12 (1972), pp. 64-97 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25612477>> [18 October 2018].

it is a breakthrough in a content and in a style all our own, two sides of our single new writing power: Blackness as real narrative and philosophical theme, and the Jamaican Rastafarian demotic as a rich alternative language form.<sup>196</sup> This publication shows once again the aesthetic tension between written language and the language of the street, the grassroots, the vernacular. These poets, Salkey says, '[chat] to us, on the printed page'.<sup>197</sup> *One Love* is another example of the vernacular poetics of the street entering the written world of a publication.

By 1970, the West Indian Students Centre in London, which had until then hosted the CAM's monthly public events, was no longer available.<sup>198</sup> Finding a new space would have required time and energy, things that the movement's remaining founders, John La Rose and Salkey, no longer had. Yet ad hoc CAM activities continued to take place and attract large audiences in venues across the city. In 1972 the CAM disappeared, leaving behind what Anne Walmsley calls a fully recognised legacy.<sup>199</sup> By the beginning of 1972, London's Keskidee Centre was hosting the types of activities that were held at the Students Centre during the CAM's residency there. Although the energy formerly found at the Students Centre was maintained, this represented the movement's final stage, as James Berry recalled : 'And then I remember the Keskidee ideas came up strong, and then it was decided that that phase of CAM had probably served its purpose and would now grow in other ways'.<sup>200</sup> Nonetheless, it was there that LKJ encountered

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<sup>196</sup> Andrew Salkey, Audvil King, Althea Helps and others ed., *One Love* (London: The Bogle-L'Uouverture Publications, 1971), p. 7. This collection was a product of the CAM (Walmsley, p. 296).

<sup>197</sup> Salkey, King, Helps and others ed., *One Love*, p. 8.

<sup>198</sup> Walmsley, p. 283.

<sup>199</sup> Walmsley, pp. 283-304.

<sup>200</sup> Walmsley, p. 300.

performed poetry such as Salkey's readings of Audvil King or Bongo Jerry's 'Mabrak' and 'Sooner or Later'. Other Caribbean writers, such as 'Jamal Ali, T-Bone Wilson and Mustapha Matura, the angry black poets of the day', were also regular performers at the Keskidee.<sup>201</sup> It is no coincidence that the development of a black radical poetics resulted in a cultural scene with a growing interest in performance events such as poetry readings, as the movement's late years corresponded to the shift in cultural practice and aesthetics of the 1970s. Performance poetry became the perfect medium for artists willing to engage in a more direct way with 'ordinary people'. Tuned to the audience's needs and reality, performance was 'a communal experience', as opposed to the individual and solitary activities of writing and reading.<sup>202</sup> It is important to remember that community engagement was central to the CAM from its initial conception. Through the organisation of literary performances and public meetings, the CAM functioned as a dynamic space for community gatherings where audience and artists could work together to articulate arts and politics. Poets who were active in the CAM explored the vernacular practice of the everyday and used performance as a way to connect with ordinary audiences. These poets became influential voices in LKJ's experimentation with dub poetry.<sup>203</sup>

Fifteen years after the CAM's dismantlement, London saw the launch of the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, organised by New Beacon Books, Race Today Publications and Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Walmsley, p. 298.

<sup>202</sup> Walmsley, p. 149.

<sup>203</sup> Walmsley, p. 298.

<sup>204</sup> *Race Today* was a British political magazine launched by the Race Today Collective, with key figures Darcus Howe, Farrukh Dondy and LKJ. It included works of nonfiction and

Activist formations such as the Black Parents Movement, the Black Youth Movement, the Bradford Black Collective and even Education for Liberation offered extra help. Following a philosophy forged in the CAM, it aimed at consolidating a network of radical thought: the book fair created a space where the radical ideas expressed in literature, politics, music, art and social life could grow, find encouragement and be shared. If not directly an ad hoc activity of the CAM, it was nonetheless deeply connected to the movement: the ‘CAM which in 1972 had seemed to disappear was now revealed only to have gone underground, a submerged source and spring for the onward movement of Caribbean creative endeavour’.<sup>205</sup>

Although held in cities throughout the UK, the book fair had at its core a transnational vision, as it created relationships across five continents. For twelve years, it brought together anyone engaged in and actively seeking freedom of cultural expression.<sup>206</sup> In today’s political climate, echoes of the book fair’s struggles on behalf of equality and social justice for all can still be heard, as it left an important legacy of cultural and political liberation for black diasporas at large.<sup>207</sup> Amongst its activities, international poetry readings are particularly

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fiction and was LKJ’s first publisher. New Beacon Books was founded in 1966 by John La Rose and his partner Sarah White. It was the UK’s first black publisher. New Beacon is also a bookshop, which has organized many groundbreaking political and social projects and still specialises in fiction and nonfiction from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, African America, South America and Britain. A group connected with this bookstore established the George Padmore Institute, an archive and educational research and information center. Bogle-L’Ouverture was a London-based publishing house founded in 1968 by the Guyanese activists Eric Huntley and Jessica Huntley.

<sup>205</sup> Walmsley, p. 303.

<sup>206</sup> Roxy Harris and Sarah White ed., *Foundations of a Movement: A Tribute to John La Rose on the Occasion of the 10th International Book Fair of Radical Black & Third World Books* (London: Villiers Publications Ltd., 1991), p. 2.

<sup>207</sup> Sarah White, Roxy Harris, and Sharmilla Beezmohun ed., *A Meeting of the Continents: The International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books - Revisited, History,*

worth remembering for the development of dub poetry.<sup>208</sup> Indeed, they functioned as a space for gatherings of the continents where local poetics could meet universal creativity. As common poetics practices arose amongst Nation Language poets, to use Brathwaite's term, different events brought on to the same stage created a vibrant environment where artistic expressions could experiment around performance, poetry and sound.<sup>209</sup> There was, as La Rose remarks, a history behind the poems as they were polished, worked out, thought out and experimented on during these events.<sup>210</sup> Encounters at these international poetry readings are often forgotten in analyses of dub poetry's emergent phase. Yet they are key moments, as they brought into a local place the poetics of a global space. Indeed, they became a space where poets encountered what was happening on a global level. In this contact zone, poets could recycle, revise, translate, transform and respond to one another's works, creating a network linked to the emergence of dub poetry.

International responses to Michael Smith's death by stoning in 1983—such as eulogies written by Brathwaite ('Stone'), Agard ('Michael Smith'), Zephaniah ('Dem people, stone poets') and Cortez ('I an I'), and even the reggae band Steel Pulse's album *Earth Crisis* (1984)—illustrate a network of international poetics. In

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*Memories, Organisation and Programmes, 1982-1995* (London: New Beacon Books, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>208</sup> Artists such as Abdilatif Adballa (Tanzania), John Agard (Guyana), James Berry (Jamaica), Valerie Bloom (Jamaica), Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados), Accabre Huntley (UK), Mahamood Jamal (India), Odia Ofeimun (Nigeria), Leroi Jones (USA) and even Edouard Glissant (Martinique) were part of these readings (White, Harris, and Bezmohun ed., *A Meeting of the Continents*, pp. 90-91).

<sup>209</sup> Michael Smith, Oku Onuora and LKJ, as well as Lillian Allen, Clifton Joseph, Jean 'Binta' Breeze and the lesser-known Lioness Chant, Final Dove, Nefertiti Gayle, Nancy Morejon and The African Dawn are examples of Nation Language poets (White, Harris, and Bezmohun ed., *A Meeting of the Continents*, p. 249).

<sup>210</sup> White, Harris, and Bezmohun ed., *A Meeting of the Continents*, p. 9.

his eulogy ‘Michael Smith (1954-1983)’, Baraka writes:

The poet, Michael Smith, was such a consciousness, and not idly, his poetry speaks directly to those two levels of our most developed minds – understanding the oppression and understanding what must be done about it.

The most developed of such intellectuals also understands that such realization is sterile unless it is a blueprint for action!<sup>211</sup>

The international poetry readings organised by the CAM and later by the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books were a platform where artistic work could travel and be presented across borders. Dub poetry is a product of these poetic movements. It is, to echo James Clifford’s essay, the result of a travelling culture.<sup>212</sup> This travelling culture emerges in the dialogue around a decolonised aesthetic that speaks from a Caribbean reality lived in both the Caribbean and Europe, a reality where the echoes of this dialogue become inspiring sources of artistic creations. The cultural context presented here is crucial to remember in order not to overlook the historical trajectory that made dub poetry possible. This context allows critics not to fall into reductive views of this poetry as having ‘no literary precedents to fall back on’.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Amiri Baraka, ‘Michael Smith (1954-1983)’, in *Eulogies* (New York: Marsilio, 1996) (p. 40).

<sup>212</sup> James Clifford, *Traveling Cultures*. Clifford’s idea can be traced back to Said, *Traveling Theory*.

<sup>213</sup> Kozain, ‘Contemporary English Oral Poetry by Black Poets in Great Britain and South Africa’, p. 116. Original quote from Rob Partridge, in LKJ’s album *Reggae Greats*.

## Outside Caribbean poetics

Oku Onuora's iconic description of dub poetry as 'a unique Jamaican thing' has had a lasting effect.<sup>214</sup> Many studies continue to place this poetry exclusively within a Caribbean context. In order to respond to the narrowness of this national boundary, it is important to complete our survey of this historical trajectory with poetic connections beyond this predefined geographical space. With a focus on The Last Poets of the Black Arts Movement and the punk poetry of John Cooper Clarke, this section builds on acknowledged artistic connections that remain underexplored by the academic world.

While attending concerts by The Last Poets and later by Gil Scott-Heron, all African-American musicians from the Black Power era and involved in the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s, I was surprised by the similarities between their works and the works of dub poets. The way things were said, the way music and voice were fused, the way people were listening and responding to the poets and the way poetry delivered a political message all made me think of shared aesthetics between the BAM and dub poetry. Later, in an interview with LKJ, I read:

And then in the Panthers I heard The Last Poets. We used to have the albums of The Last Poets which circulated amongst the membership and I was attracted to what they were doing, using the voice and percussion. I started to do that.

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<sup>214</sup> Habekost, p. 5.

... What The Last Poets did was important in pointing me to my own language.<sup>215</sup>

He further explained:

I heard them when I was in the Black Panthers. [...] We [...] also had an LP by the last poets that was circulating around and I thought "Wow these guys are using the language of the street as a vehicle for poetic discourse I mean this is fantastic, this is great I want to do something like that with Jamaican speech." So yeah, they were a big influence on me and this idea of the voice working with percussion, with drums and all of that, I first got an insight into that from the last poets. Yeah they were a big influence. I found out about Gil later on and me and Gil did a tour of America back in the 80s. We played all over America from New York to Alabama.<sup>216</sup>

The influence of practitioners such as The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron on dub poetry has of course been noticed. The militancy of Black Power, transmitted through bold, revolutionary words calling for political and social awareness embedded in a black consciousness, is a shared characteristic that links dub poetry to the aesthetic and politics of the BAM. I have already mentioned the influence of the black radicalisation of the 1960s on the development of the poetics of the 'angry boys'. Here I would like to briefly add to this influence the political agency

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<sup>215</sup> Caesar, 'Linton Kwesi Johnson Talks to Burt Caesar', p. 65. At their show at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in 2016, at which I was present, Abiodun Oyewole, one of the group's remaining members, commented that they were the first in the BAM to print their lyrics on the back cover of their records. I suggest that the LP thus made the relationship between the message and the performance more straightforward and more accessible for subsequent poetic inspiration, showing the relationship between what is said and how it is said, between the how and the what of poetics.

<sup>216</sup> Joe Lowndes, 'Linton Kwesi Johnson and Black British Struggle'. Africa is a Country. 26 May 2017. Blog. Available at <<https://africasacountry.com/2017/05/linton-kwesi-johnson-and-black-british-struggle/>> [07 May 2018].

in the poetic words of the BAM. Indeed, the poetics of both The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, to name just two, blurs the distinction between poetic words and political actions: for them, poetry is words in action. This action-driven dimension of words is a source of inspiration for poets to write from a politically engaged perspective. In so doing, they make poetry functional: it carries a political mission. It is in this interdependency amongst the words, action and function of poetry that the BAM influenced dub poetry, a layer that I now add to the conversation.

The BAM began in 1965 and broke apart around 1975-1976. Leroi Jones's installation in Harlem from Manhattan's Lower East Side after Malcolm X's assassination in March 1965 often symbolises the movement's birth.<sup>217</sup> Soon after, the BAM travelled around black communities across the United States. Although the movement's two hallmarks are theatre and poetry, its artistic productions extend to literary and musical criticism, drama reviews, magazines, film and workshops. Defined as the artistic translation of the politics of Black Power, the BAM has an action-driven philosophy that drives its understanding of art as functional. As Jones wrote:

I would like to . . . say that my conception of art, Black art, is that it has to be collective, it has to be functional, it has to be committed and that actually, if it's not stemming from conscious nationalism, then at this time it's invalid. When I say collective, that it comes from the collective experience of Black people,

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<sup>217</sup> RaShell R. Smith-Spears, 'Black Arts Movement', in *Icons of African American Literature: the Black Literary World*, ed. Yolanda Williams Page (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Icons, 2011), pp. 43-52 (p. 44).

when I say committed, it has to be committed to change, revolutionary change.

When I say functional, it has to have a function to the lives of Black people.<sup>218</sup>

As opposed to dub poetry, which developed without manifestos or theoretical writing to accompany its artistic practice, the BAM's art was fully discussed and theorised. In a foundational essay entitled 'The Black Arts Movement', Larry Neal explains the dialogue between the politics of Black Power and the aesthetics of the BAM:

Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. [...]

The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics.<sup>219</sup>

The work of The Last Poets indeed shows a reciprocal relationship between what is said and what is done. The word is not only used to transmit an idea. The poetic expression employed shows a commitment to a concrete realisation of the content. Because of the poets' political commitment, the realisation of this content becomes the function of the poem. This link between transmission and action is best understood through J. L. Austin's concept of performative language and speech acts. Austin's seminal text *How to Do Things with Words* is a collection of his lectures that approached language as a performative act.<sup>220</sup> Related to the

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<sup>218</sup> Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest / Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 23. Original quote from Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), p. 165.

<sup>219</sup> Larry Neal, 'The Black Arts Movement', *The Drama Review*, 12 (1986), pp. 28-39 (p. 29) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144377>> [07 May 2015].

<sup>220</sup> John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

verb ‘to perform’, the term ‘performative’ is used to indicate ‘that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action’.<sup>221</sup> The book theorises the agency of language through the power of words to create and/or to do something. Austin’s notion of performativity has been reused, revised and adapted by many scholars across many disciplines.<sup>222</sup> Yet because his early attempt to theorise the performativity of language remains closely connected to the uttered word, his approach is particularly significant for investigating dub poetry. Indeed, it allows the focus to remain on the words, rather than moving to a more general area of investigation such as identity or behaviour. Austin explains performativity in language with the following example. By saying ‘I promise’, the speaker is actually making something called a promise. Promising becomes a performative act called a speech act that is turned into concrete action through the very utterance of the words. Not all sentences have the same agency. Indeed, sentences such as ‘It is raining’ are called constatives because rather than creating something, they describe a situation. By uttering these words, the speaker is not creating the rain.

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<sup>221</sup> Austin, p. 6.

<sup>222</sup> The concept of performativity emerged in linguistics and the philosophy of language. Over the years, it has undergone major changes. It is now used in deconstructive approaches, gender studies and narratology. See, for instance John R. Searle, Dell Hymes, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. In making the distinction between Austin and Butler, Susan Standford Friedman explains: ‘But rather than emphasizing the singularity of the performative speech act as Austin does, Butler suggests that identity is the result of the repetition of discursive acts. In the context of subject or “identity” formation, performativity is a form of “citationality”, a repetition or reiteration of norms. ... Butler stresses the non-theatrical aspect of this type of performativity because the theatrical suggests some form of pre-existing subject with agency that selects a given performance. ... In her view, subjects don’t chose an identity to perform but are “hailed” into an identity by the regularity discourses of society’ (H. Adlai Murdoch, *Creolizing the Metropole: Migrant Caribbean Identities in Literature and Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 103. Original quote from Susan Friedman Stanford, ‘Border Talk,’ Hybridity, and Performativity: Cultural Theory and Identity in the Spaces between Difference’, *Eurozine* (2002), pp. 1-25 (p. 6) <<https://www.eurozine.com/border-talk-hybridity-and-performativity/>> [23 June 2019]).

However, ‘It is raining’ warns the listener of a situation, and it is in consequence of this warning that the sentence becomes performative. Austin’s theory of performativity is further defined by the success of a speech act. Depending on the impact of the uttered words, he makes a distinction between felicitous and infelicitous speech acts.<sup>223</sup> There are a number of situations in which a performative sentence does not work, such as misunderstanding, misnaming or ‘if certain rules, transparently simple rules, are broken’.<sup>224</sup> More pertinent to this study of poetry, infelicitous speech acts can be found in utterances that are ‘in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy’.<sup>225</sup> This unsuccessful performativity of poetic language is explained by a lack of seriousness and sincerity attributable to the artistic context. Such an argument is, of course, problematic for a discussion of the language found in theatre, poetry or literature, as it nullifies the agency of poetic words. Although his view needs to be challenged and rethought, Austin’s approach to language nonetheless offers interesting analytical perspectives—which should not, however, be used as theoretical ends. His concept of performativity not only binds but also emphasises the interdependency between saying and doing. The Last Poets’ ‘Black Rage’ is a good illustration of this, as the poetic language demonstrates the idea that words are action. They have a creative power:

then our voice will be  
more powerful than a Gun  
and as we Speak

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<sup>223</sup> ‘Infelicitous’, ‘unsatisfactory’, ‘unhappy’ and ‘unsuccessful’ are interchangeably used to describe a performative sentence that has gone wrong. A performative sentence uttered in a literary context is infelicitous, as its performativity is not successful (see below).

<sup>224</sup> Austin, p. 14.

<sup>225</sup> Austin, p. 22.

We'll get things Done.<sup>226</sup>

Voice is more powerful than gun. With words, they will accomplish things.

Similarly, in LKJ's poem 'One Love', words such as 'freedom', 'peace' and 'love' should become reality once properly expressed:

but love is just a word;

give it MEANIN  
thru HACKSHAN;  
express it wid true feelin.<sup>227</sup>

This agency makes poetic words into what Elmer Griffin calls 'word bullets'.<sup>228</sup> It responds to the action-driven aesthetic of the BAM, in which poetic language has a concrete function. The 'power of the physical performed word and its contentious politics' that shaped the poetic expression of the BAM manifested in the context of dub poetry through the concept of 'Words Sounds and Power'.<sup>229</sup> Indeed, the BAM's awareness of the power of words bears striking comparison with this Rastafarian expression, which is based on an understanding that

the word is both sound and power. It is sound not only because its effect is aural but also because it is capable of quality, capable of being "sweet", of

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<sup>226</sup> The Last Poets, *On a Mission: Selected Poems as a History of the Last Poets* (New York: An Owl Book, 1996), p. 161.

<sup>227</sup> Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood*, p. 68.

<sup>228</sup> Elmer Griffin, 'Word Bullets, Review of Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry by Christian Habekost', *Transition*, 66 (1995), pp. 57-65 (p. 60)

<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2935284.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A8168efd562637436fea1e817d500f671>> [04 March 2014].

<sup>229</sup> Tyler Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 198. The concept of Word Sound and Power is also discussed in chapter 1.

thrilling the hearer. It is power because it can inspire responses such as fear or anger or submission.<sup>230</sup>

With a communicative efficiency, both artistic traditions recognise and activate the ‘magic’ of the words. This magic is used to express the politically engaged dimension of their art.

Finally, going back to a local production context, the work of punk poets such as John Cooper Clarke played a similarly significant role. The connection between reggae and punk in the 1970s is of course a commonly accepted and discussed phenomenon. Bob Marley’s famous song ‘Punk Reggae Party’ is a testimony of this convergence:

We’re gonna have a party.  
It’s a punky reggae party.  
The Wailers will be there,  
The Splits, the Feelgoods and the Clash.

In the UK cultural scene, social and cultural movements such as Rock against Racism played a tremendous role in bringing together the fans of reggae and punk music.<sup>231</sup> Connecting a black and white audience along lines of class rather than race, this major festival is remembered as ‘the highest-decibel rejection of racism

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<sup>230</sup> Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari Roots and Ideology* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994), p. 227. It is worth noting that the first and only dub poetry anthology CD, created by various artists of the Cultural Training Centre in Jamaica, is called *Word Sound 'ave Power* (Various artists. *Word Soun ave' Power: Reggae Poets*. Heartbeat. 1983 [CD]).

<sup>231</sup> Rock against Racism is remembered as a punk-reggae crossover, but in fact it included a wider range of musical coalitions, as its slogan makes clear: ‘Reggae, Soul, Rock ‘n’ Roll, Jazz, Funk and Punk’ (Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 121). For more information on this social and cultural movement, see, for instance, Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*; Roger Huddle and Red Saunders, *Reminiscences of RAR: Rocking Against Racism 1976 - 1982* (London: Redwords, 2017); Syd Shelton, *Rock Against Racism: Syd Shelton* (London: Autograph 2015); Ian Goodyer, *Crisis Music: The Cultural Politics of Rock Against Racism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

and fascism ever to hit the UK'.<sup>232</sup> Although its political implications cannot be narrated here without being oversimplified, the idea can nonetheless be summarised as follow:

Rock Against Racism operated between 1976 and 1981, and was a mass campaign that combined anti-racist politics with popular culture. Throughout this period RAR used the medium of concerts featuring black and white musicians as a focus for, and practical demonstration of, its politics of 'inter-racial' unity.<sup>233</sup>

In Paul Gilroy's words, Rock against Racism was also

[an] answer to the racist pronouncements of rock stars like Eric Clapton, who had expressed his admiration for Enoch Powell on several occasions, and David Bowie, who had not only said that Britain was in need of right-wing dictatorship but declared Hitler to be 'the first superstar'.<sup>234</sup>

Surprisingly, analyses of dub poetry have largely ignored its artistic connection to punk poetry. As the leaflets of some poetry gigs testify, LKJ shared the line-up with punk poets such as Nico, Cab Voltaire and even the Pop Group.<sup>235</sup> This lack of recognition might be explained by insufficient secondary sources. Indeed, it is only by digging into the archives of poetry evenings that one can identify a shared space

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<sup>232</sup> Evan Smith, 'Are the Kids United? The Communist Party of Great Britain, Rock against Racism, and the Politics of Youth Culture', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 5 (2011), pp. 85-118 (p. 90) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41879240>> [23 May 2018].

<sup>233</sup> Goodyer, p. 1.

<sup>234</sup> Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, p. 121.

<sup>235</sup> Paul Morley, 'The Pop Group/Nico/Linton Kwesi Johnson/Cabaret Voltaire: An Appraisal Of 'Next Year's Thing'', *New Musical Express*, 21 October 1978<<https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Artist/linton-kwesi-johnson>> [12 March 2017]; Paul Morley, 'Public Image Ltd., The Pop Group, Merger, Linton Kwesi Johnson , John Cooper Clarke: Kings Hall, Manchester', *New Musical Express*, 3 March 1979<<https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Artist/linton-kwesi-johnson>> [12 March 2017].

of performance. The lack of recognition also reflects the already mentioned persistent approach to dub poetry within predefined interpretative frameworks organised around race and nation. Yet poets who shared the same performance space, whether on the punk or the dub cultural scene, neither experienced nor defined their art from a colour line. As I reintroduce their artistic conversation into the historical trajectory of dub poetry, I continue the difficult task of thinking outside the persistent zealotry of colour-coded, compartmentalised and essentialist analyses.

Musically, the overlap between punk-rock and reggae-dub can be heard in a number of songs.<sup>236</sup> Because the poetic dialogue between punk and dub poetry is less transparent, it is tempting to jump to the conclusion that they meet in the exploration of an innovative bind between music and poetry. In their corresponding so-called white and black cultures, punk poets use punk while dub poets use reggae as the backing tracks for their political poetry. Yet this claim is rather reductive, as both LKJ and John Cooper Clarke have a different relationship to music. The BBC documentary *Evidently ... John Cooper Clarke* presents its subject's connection with the punk scene as a 'good match for him'.<sup>237</sup> His style and his type of poetry fit the spirit of the punk crowd.<sup>238</sup> He further explains that

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<sup>236</sup> Don Letts explains that in this 'serious cultural exchange', reggae 'was a culture that spoke in a currency with which the punks could identify. It was the soundbite-type, the anti-fashion fashion, its rebel stance and, importantly, the fact that reggae was a kind of musical reportage talking about things that mattered' (Don Letts, 'Dem Crazy Baldheads are my Mates', *The Guardian Online*, 24 October 2001<<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2001/oct/24/artsfeatures4>> [26 March 2016]).

<sup>237</sup> *Evidently... John Cooper Clarke*. dir. John Ross. BBC 4. 2012 [DVD]

<sup>238</sup> As Cooper Clarke explains, his style, with its meticulous choice of clothes, fits punk's dress code, which he defines as 'being everything but a flower shirt, really' (in *Evidently... John Cooper Clarke*). His electrified hairstyle also visually conveys his connection to the punk attitude.

throughout his career, he has not been much involved in the musical side of his poetry. Before his iconic punk years, he performed as a comedian, sharing the stage with ventriloquists, strippers, other comedians and even fire-eaters. Looking at the protest side of his and LKJ's poetry, Partridge highlights a solidarity in their political struggle:

While those such as Johnson understood reggae and dub as a form of 'rebel music', which was simply the latest stage in a long history of protest against the colonial oppression of 'Babylon' [...], in the case of punks, there was a process of reinterpretation in terms of a discourse against cultural hegemony per se. This is verbal dub in the sense that words are deconstructed and remixed in order to change their signification. [...] Whether punks understood the ideological significance of dub poems or not, and whether they fully appreciated the implications of Rastafarian socio-religious discourse or not, they nevertheless identified continuities and recognized a voice speaking powerfully to their own situation. Indeed, in a sense, with punk the ideology was versioned again in the white community.<sup>239</sup>

Continuing to think in terms of solidarity, I suggest that between the performances of punk and dub poets, propitious ground for artistic identification started to emerge. In the symbolic equivalence between their works, both types of poets recognised the articulation of an identity that neither expressed nor represented the centre. Punk poetry helped to develop a cultural scene, on the margins of the British society, where counter-hegemonic voices could be heard. Punk and dub

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<sup>239</sup> Christopher Partridge, *Dub in Babylon: Understanding the Evolution and Significance of Dub Reggae in Jamaica and Britain from King Tubby to Post-punk* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2010), p. 216.

poetry, therefore, shared a space where their differences from mainstream society could be expressed and even celebrated. Sharing the bill of a poetry evening called ‘Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt’, LKJ and Cooper Clarke, performing in front of a mixed audience, used a careful mode of delivery that skilfully demonstrated their cultural affiliation: the Jamaican pronunciation in LKJ’s performance of ‘Sony Lettah’ reveals his cultural position in the same way that Cooper Clarke’s Northern accent distinctively announces an off-centre Manchester identity.<sup>240</sup> With an unconventional poetic language, they both speak from the margins, where a black and white working class unites around a common fight for social justice. There is a shared social identity.

‘Sonny’s Lettah’ was written in response to the legislation known as the sus law, which gave police the legal right to stop, search and arrest on the basis of personal, and often unjustified, suspicion (hence the law’s popular name).<sup>241</sup> As LKJ explained before his performance, the text is based on his own experience and represented the general reality amongst his peers. It is structured as an epistolary narrative.<sup>242</sup> A boy named Sonny writes a letter to his mother from ‘Brixton Prison / Jebb Avenue / Landan south-west two / Inglan’. He has been incarcerated

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<sup>240</sup> *Ten Years in an Open Neck Shirt*. dir. Nick May. Arts Council of Great Britain, Metropolis Pictures & Channel Four Television Ltd. 1982. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oDx5e-NDQQ>> [10 November 2017].

<sup>241</sup> This law ‘dated back to the 1824 Vagrancy Act but had lain dormant for several decades until police resurrected it in earnest in the 1970s, aiming it disproportionately at black youth’ (Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Song* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 385).

<sup>242</sup> ‘The use of the epistolary form to dramatize dialogue, or more generally monologue, has been one of the most successful adaptations of the oral to the scribal in Caribbean poetry [...] Ironically, the “letter home” has provided an equally fine opportunity for the development of poetry dependant on the power and potentialities of the creole-speaking voice as much so-called performance poetry’ (Edwards, ‘The Foundational Generation’, p. 121).

after a sus search. The poem starts in a conventional way, with polite formulae:

Dear Mama,  
Good Day.  
I hope dat wen  
deze few lines reach yu,  
they may find yu in di bes af helt<sup>243</sup>

In this introduction, 'LKJ humanizes Sonny by narrating his devotion to his family [...] thereby countering the stereotypical views of black criminality and violence'.<sup>244</sup> The rest of the poem is a descriptive confession: as Sonny tried to protect his brother Jim from an arbitrary arrest, the episode escalated into uncontrolled violence. Contrasted with the working environment of the city, where 'evrybady jus a hosel an a bosel / fi goh home fi dem evening showah', the two brothers are sitting and waiting at a bus stop, causing no fuss. It is in this quiet space, outside 'the jam of the national landscape' that unjustified violence and crime happen:<sup>245</sup>

all of a sudden  
a police van pull-up.  
Out jump tree policeman,  
di hole a dem carryin batan.

There is a sense of surprise and arbitrariness in this description, which of course mirrors the unjustified arrest under the sus law. Jim tells the policemen to let him go, 'far him noh dhu notn / an him naw teef, / nat even a butn.' But his demand is unheeded. Reacting to the physical attack on Jim, Sonny fights back:

so mi jook one in him eye  
an him started to cry  
mi tump one in him mout  
an him started to shout

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<sup>243</sup> The written version is taken from Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, p. 25.

<sup>244</sup> Wójcik, p. 157.

<sup>245</sup> James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 76.

mi kick one pan him shin  
an him started to spin  
mi tump him pan him chin  
an him drap pan a bin

an crash  
an ded.

More policemen arrive. The quiet of the bus stop has now shifted into a moral panic, as a murder has just happened. From the final line, the reader understands that Jim has been arrested for sus and Sonny for murder. Although it ends with reassuring words—‘Mama, / I fret, / I get depress / an doun-hearted’—the poem mirrors the horrific everyday reality of this racist law. Throughout his performance, LKJ’s use of Jamaican pronunciation, reflected here in the spelling, functions as a mark of differentiation that reinforces the poet’s belonging to a marginalised community. The poem’s content is obviously in line with this marginalised position.

‘Sonny’s Lettah’ is in sharp contrast to Cooper Clarke’s preceding performance of ‘Gaberdine Angus’ and ‘The Pest’.<sup>246</sup> The first poem, although it slows down around the second half of the second stanza—‘here’s one now go on act the goat ...’—is delivered in his iconic breakneck speed. As Julia Novak notes, Cooper Clarke used this high-speed mode of delivery ‘to parallel punk music where cover versions of Rock and Roll songs were done at twice the original speed’.<sup>247</sup> It became his trademark, ‘signalling his alliance with the punk scene [...] acoustically’, just as his hair and clothes did visually.<sup>248</sup> The following poem, ‘The

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<sup>246</sup> Although my discussion here refers to the performed versions, I use the text in John Cooper Clarke, *Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt and Other Poems* (London: An Arena Book, 1983).

<sup>247</sup> Novak, p. 184.

<sup>248</sup> Novak, p. 184.

'Pest', is an extensive alliteration exercise. Although he gives a short introduction, this work's surrealism and alliterations beginning with the letter 'p', accompanied by missing punctuation, make the poem very difficult to understand. Pronounced with a Northern accent at a ridiculous speed, the unintelligible content of these two poems is not a crucial element of their performance. For the listener, it is impossible to clearly distinguish the words and to make sense of the scene being described:

the pest pulled up propped his pushbike on a pillar box paused at a post and pissed 'piss in the proper place' pronounced a perturbed pedestrian petulantly and presently this particular part of the planet was plunged into a panorama of public pressure and pleasure through pain [...] the powerful police picked up the pest pronounced him a pinko a pansy a punk rocker and a poof they punched him poked him pummelled his pelvis punctured his pipes played ping-pong with his pubic parts and packed him in a place of penal putrification he pondered upon progressive politics put pen to paper and provocatively and persuasively propagated his personal political premise – pity: a police provocateur put poison pellets in the pest's porridge the police provocateur was promoted and the pest was presented with the pulitzer peace prize ... posthumously.

The lack of pauses in the poem's performance tells the audience that its purpose goes beyond the content. The delivery style uses words to create a sense of chaos, of sonic exaggeration with disproportional speed. The noise created by the voice brings an energy to the performance that suggests the jumping and screaming of a punk concert. The performance plays with punk culture's usual process of defamiliarisation: embodied in a Northern accent, it represents the unfamiliar space of a marginalised community. Dub poetry responded to the presence of this marginalised space with poetic expressions that sounded equally unfamiliar. Between punk and dub poetry, there is an identification in the counter-hegemonic voices of British society. Sharing the stage, acts performing dub or punk poetry

slowly but inexorably transformed the public space by increasingly conjoining British and Caribbean communities.

# Chapter 3: Rethinking Cultural Encounters

## Poetics of Relation, the black Atlantic and dub

As I read previous criticism, I remain surprised by the absence of the Martiniquan thinker and writer Édouard Glissant from the discussion of dub poetry. His admiration for the form is undeniable. The numerous references throughout his work, as well as his dedication of *Poétique de la relation* to Michael Smith, testify to a strong connection that is too often forgotten.<sup>249</sup> In the first pages of his groundbreaking *Poétique de la relation*, he writes: ‘À Michael Smith, poète assassiné aux archipels, comblés de mort patente’.<sup>250</sup> LKJ’s account of his encounter with Glissant is another example of Glissant’s presence around that poetic tradition:

Later that year [1982] I received an invitation from Édouard Glissant, the Martiniquan poet and novelist who was then editor of UNESCO’s *Courier*, to take part in poetry events in Paris and Milan. The events were to be held in November. I knew I would be in Jamaica then, [...] so I suggested Mikey as an alternative and Édouard agreed.<sup>251</sup>

These testimonies need to be taken seriously, as they hint at an important yet

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<sup>249</sup> See, for instance, Édouard Glissant, *Poétique du Divers*; Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde: Poétique IV* (Paris Gallimard, 1997).

<sup>250</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (France: Gallimard, 1990), p. 10. ‘For Michael Smith, assassinated poet for the archipelago laden with palpable death’. This translation is from the first page of Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation [Poétique de la Relation]* trans. by Betsy Wing (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997). All the other translations are mine.

<sup>251</sup> Johnson, ‘Remembering Michael Smith’, p. 159.

unexpected contribution to the history of dub poetry and its study. In chapter 2, I discussed dub poetry as an example of a cultural product that emerged from transnational dialogues across the Atlantic. Glissant's wide-ranging work offers theoretical and philosophical tools to approach such dialogues. As he explains, there is a tendency to analyse culture as a 'natural' element, one often understood from national or ethnic angles:

On a fini par considérer les cultures, sous un angle national, ethnique, générique (civilisationnel), comme données "naturelles" du mouvement d'interaction qui ordonne ou éparpille notre monde à partager.<sup>252</sup>

The study of dub poetry is no exception and partakes in this critical trend. Glissant's work offers the precious opportunity to imagine a world where connections are not organised around notions of ethnicity, race or nationality. In this thesis, I concentrate on his concept of Relation to think about the creative impulse that arises from cultural movements. More precisely, I use it as a tool to approach the cultural encounters created by these transnational dialogues, whose unexpected and unforeseeable outcomes must be conceptualised outside predefined categories. In the unpredictability of Relation, there are no segregated relationships created by standardised arrangements. It becomes a tool to reach beyond the superficial organisation of people, animals, animate and inanimate objects, places, nature.

Glissant's work functions as both a descriptive model for literary analysis and a prescription for being in our world. Relation is not only a way of validating and

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<sup>252</sup> Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, p. 173. 'We ended up considering cultures, from a national, ethnic, generic (civilisational) perspective, as "natural" data of the movement of interaction that orders or scatters the world we must share'.

explaining a text but also an ‘art de vivre l’unité-diversité du monde’.<sup>253</sup> It offers a frame of mind that shapes encounters with and approaches to texts to the point of transforming the poetics of criticism. Relation opens the imaginary of our reality. Said otherwise, Relation creates a productive dialogue between a mode of analysing literature and a mode of being.

In Glissant’s lifelong literary reflexions, Relation is a persistent trope, an aesthetic as well as a literary and philosophical theory. He introduces this concept in *Le Discours Antillais*, where he defines it as a world where complexity is celebrated rather than viewed as something to decrease. However, it is in *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* (1995), *Traité du Tout-Monde : Poétique IV* (1997) and *Philosophie de la Relation : Poésie en Étendue* (2009) that Relation is thoroughly discussed, defined and redefined. While reappearing and developing throughout his literary projects, ‘poetics of Relation’ expresses a creative way to think about the different relationships, in constant becoming and evolution, that create our world. It precisely refers to the process by which things meet and influence each other. In this process of encounter, the dynamism of the meeting point generates change, which creates new forms. As there are no primary or secondary elements in culture, Relation is a moment of synthesis-genesis amongst a non-hierarchical assemblage of things, and cultural formation is the result of ongoing changes in the constituent elements. Cultural elements become something new when they enter the process of mutation created by their encounters. Opposed to nationalist and ethnic

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<sup>253</sup> Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, p. 94.

perspectives that propose an understanding of culture based on ideas of ‘authentic’ and ‘natural’ generic elements, Glissant’s theoretical tool of Relation offers a powerful counter-discourse.

These chaotic, multidirectional and unforeseen forms of connection create a dense network of relations in which opaque elements are made irreducible.<sup>254</sup> Opacity, a fundamental principle of Glissant’s Relation, challenges any conception of a world grounded in the obviousness of relations. It is the result of an irreducible complexity working against ‘la transparence préconçue de modèles universels’.<sup>255</sup> Opacity is an ethical demand not to be reduced, controlled or dominated by a uniform system of thought and standardised interpretations. It is by consequence the acceptance of unidentifiable difference. By breaking down uniformity, opacity recognises that diversity, created by chaotic relations, is what constitutes the foundation of this world in Relation:

Nous appelons donc opacité ce qui protégé le Divers. Et désormais nous appelons transparence l’imaginaire de la Relation, qui en pressentait depuis longtemps [...] les tourbillons imprévisibles.<sup>256</sup>

Opacity confronts the limits of sense-making. Glissant claims that in the act of understanding, of making sense, one reduces things or ideas to one’s own ‘scale of conceptual measurement’.<sup>257</sup> Opacity is a form of resistance to this act of control. In the etymology of the French *comprendre*, ‘to understand’, is *prendre*,

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<sup>254</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981), p. 245.

<sup>255</sup> Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, p. 207. ‘The preconceived transparency of universal models’.

<sup>256</sup> Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, p. 75. ‘So we call opacity that which protects the Diverse. And now we call transparency the imaginary of Relation, which for a long time foreshadowed [...] its unpredictable whirlpools’.

<sup>257</sup> Celia Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 20.

which means ‘to take, to grasp, to make one’s own’. *Com-prendre*, or ‘cumprehendere’ in its Latin version, ‘c’est le prendre avec soi, se l’approprier, donc le changer, le créer à son image’.<sup>258</sup> Opacity, in other words, is the right to a non-comprehensible diversity. It is the acceptance of unidentifiable difference as well as the celebration of the unexpected, the unpredictable, the multidirectional that creates this diversity.<sup>259</sup>

In order for this dynamic non-hierarchical cultural formation to work, the concept of Relation requires a careful negotiation of differences within unity. Indeed, Relation is not about seeing the world through the levelling of the singularities that constitute its different elements. Not being ‘all the same’, these elements nonetheless function within a universal whole. This is what Glissant calls the totality of Relation. Against contentious readings that would see this universal whole as a threat to the singular system of the Absolute, it is important to distinguish *mondialité* from *mondialisation*.<sup>260</sup> While *mondialisation* deals with how our world is changing in order to respond to the specific needs of a few powerful forces, be they economic, social or historical, *mondialité* is the creation

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<sup>258</sup> Clément Mbom, ‘Édouard Glissant, de l’Opacité à la Relation’, in *Poétiques d’Édouard Glissant*, ed. Jaques Chevrier (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris Sorbonne, 1999), pp. 245-254 (p. 248). ‘It is to take it with one, to appropriate it, which means to change it, to create it in one’s own image’. Betsy Wing’s translation is useful to move from a francophone to an anglophone context: ‘In this version of understanding the verb *to grasp* contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation. Let our understanding prefer the gesture of giving-on-and-with that opens finally on totality’ (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation [Poétique de la Relation]*, trans. by Wing, p. 192).

<sup>259</sup> The notion of opacity is complex and merits a more refined analysis than the one given here. My discussion includes passing comments simply to show how opacity brings into the concept of Relation the ethical act of refusing reductive ways of engaging with the connections between people, places, objects.

<sup>260</sup> *Mondialité* can be translated as ‘globality’ or ‘world-mentality’, ‘worldliness’ or ‘worlding’, and *mondialisation* as ‘globalisation’ (Angela Last, ‘Édouard Glissant’. Global Social Theory. Web site. Available at <<https://globalsocialtheory.org/thinkers/edouard-glissant-2/>> [02 July 2019]).

of a world produced by the diversity and the ongoing connectivity of various forms of encounters. Within one universal body, called *tout-monde* or *la totalité-monde*, Relation is a framework that connects *le divers*, the universal whole of all possible diversity, to the unique, the singularities of things. In the notion of Relation's representation of the global world, Glissant explains, the location of a place is 'incontournable': On the one hand, place is inescapable in the conception of our world, as we cannot escape the physicality of our living environment or its particular materiality, but on the other hand, a place is indiscernible because its outline cannot be defined simply by physical borders. Place is thus paradoxically crucial and negligible. As Arnaud Sabatier rightly notes, the word 'incontournable' has an ambiguous semantic meaning that is highly suggestive of an unresolved tension between the local and the global.<sup>261</sup> The French adjective 'incontournable' is used to describe something that is hard to ignore yet hard to see, and hence hard to define. In the conception of a world that is not reducible to either ethnic or nationalistic categories, the singularity of a specific place is both important and trivial. A poetic of Relation negotiates the universal of *mondialité* and the

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<sup>261</sup> 'Glissant répète "le lieu est incontournable" [...] On peut d'abord entendre cette phrase en un sens que l'on dira épistémologique : on ne saurait circonscrire les lieux, c'est-à-dire les finir et les définir. Et cela n'est pas le signe d'une incapacité ou d'une défaillance humaine, ce n'est surtout pas un appel à renoncer au savoir ou au discours ; c'est l'expression de l'impossibilité de totaliser, de systématiser les lieux qui toujours débordent, excèdent, renvoient, rappellent, annoncent...'. Arnaud Sabatier, 'Les Pacotilleuses d'Édouard Glissant: Une Poésie de Resistance, Philosophie de la Relation et Politique de l'Imaginaire'. September 2012. Online transcript of a talk given at the Université de la Réunion. Available at <[http://osoi.univ-reunion.fr/fileadmin/Fichiers/OSOI/Textes/PDF/textes-coll-creolite-autochtonie/Session-02-A-Sabatier-Les-Pacotilleuses\\_v01.pdf](http://osoi.univ-reunion.fr/fileadmin/Fichiers/OSOI/Textes/PDF/textes-coll-creolite-autochtonie/Session-02-A-Sabatier-Les-Pacotilleuses_v01.pdf)> [26 March 2016]. 'Glissant repeats, "Place is unavoidable" [...] We can first interpret these words in a sense that we might call epistemological: we cannot circumscribe places, that is to say, limit them and define them. And this is not the sign of a human incapacity or failure, it is especially not a call to renounce knowledge or discourse; it is the expression of the impossibility of totalising, of systematising places, which always overflow, exceed, send back, recall, announce...'.

particularity of our physical surroundings in the specific moment of encounter:

il y a un lieu incontournable de l'émission de l'œuvre littéraire, mais aujourd'hui  
l'œuvre littéraire convient d'autant mieux au lieu, qu'elle établit relation entre  
ce lieu et la totalité-monde.<sup>262</sup>

'L'émission de l'œuvre'—in other words, the moment of synthesis-genesis—forms new elements by combining the specificities of both their place of creation and the global network created by ongoing processes of encounters. As already said, in this mediation, Relation functions non-hierarchically to connect things in unpredictable, unexpected and multidirectional ways.<sup>263</sup> In order to conceptualise such unexpected connections, Glissant proposes using a *pensée archipélique* (archipelagic thought). This term alludes to the apparent scattering of an archipelago's geographical landscape, which is actually just the visible parts of a much larger, unified mass below the water. Likewise operating in these two dimensions, *pensée archipélique* is a system of thought based on fractures, disjunction and unpredictability but also connectivity and unity. It is a tool for interpreting the organicity of elements within a world of Relation. *Pensée archipélique* comes as a response to *pensée de système*, also called *pensée continentale*, which organises, schematises, classifies things according to an alleged 'natural' order. The organicity offered by a poetics of Relation, on the other hand, gives rise to unpredictable connections made from unexpected

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<sup>262</sup> Glissant, *Poétique du Divers*, p. 28. 'There is an unavoidable place of the emission of the literary work, but today the literary work is more connected to the place, as it establishes a relationship between this place and the world-totality'.

<sup>263</sup> These chaotic connections are characterised by 'le choc, l'intrication, les répulsions, les attirances, les connivences, les oppositions, les conflits entre les cultures des peuples' (Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, p. 94). 'The shock, entanglement, repulsions, attractions, connivances, oppositions, conflicts between the cultures of the peoples'.

directions. It is in such a chaotic network that the universal world links William Faulkner's work to Bob Marley's song, the architecture of Chicago to the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro or Caracas, the theories of Benoit Mandelbrot to the work of Wilfredo Lam, all conceived as *échos-monde*.<sup>264</sup> This world of infinitely possible arbitrary connections allows us to quote the cultures of other peoples from multiple directions. It is precisely the interpretative openness of Glissant's system of Relation that provides the necessary tools for a study of poetry that wants to explore forms of intertextuality beyond historical, political or social categories. Yet by embracing the unpredictable and unexpected, the concept of Relation tends to shadow or minimise other networks of connectivity, such as those created by historical movements of slavery, migration and colonialism, as well as their ongoing consequences. In a world of Relation as theorised by Glissant, connections are reduced to the philosophical principle of unexpected creativity, born of the dynamism of synthesis-genesis. Moreover, obviously aware of the difficulty of negotiating difference within a notion of universal totality, the Martiniquan Glissant proposed a theory that ironically echoes a French philosophy. In the 1990s, when his work on Relation was first published, many political debates in France were driven by a distinctively French conception of universalism.<sup>265</sup> Whether brought to bear on issues of 'citizenship for North

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<sup>264</sup> Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, p. 93. Glissant uses three related images to understand his world of Relation beyond the inextricable and pre-established divisions of race, class and gender: *totalité-monde*, *échos-monde* and *chaos-monde* (world-totality, world-echoes, world-chaos). As Betsy Wing summarises in the introduction to her translation, 'The world is totality (concrete and quantifiable), echoes (feedback), and chaos (spiraling and redundant trajectories), all at once, depending on our many ways of sensing and addressing it' (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation [Poétique de la Relation]*, trans. by Wing, p. xv).

<sup>265</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, 'French Universalism in the Nineties', *Differences* 15, 2 (2004), pp. 65-86 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-15-2-32>> [22 March 2017].

African immigrants, greater access to political office for women, or domestic partnership for homosexual couples', universalism was used as a weapon against any form of discrimination.<sup>266</sup> As Joan Scott explains, this distinctive idea of universalism was a restatement of some of the principles of the 1789 Revolution that rested on a division between the nation and the individual. The nation 'was the expression of the people's will', articulated by individuals who acted as the nation's representatives.<sup>267</sup> Although it seems that this division is based on an abstraction of the idea of individuality, its aim was to promote a relativised version of the self that could better represent an abstract collectivity. Individuals had to act in ways that made them the 'embodiment of a disembodied "people"'.<sup>268</sup> Reappearing in the 1990s, this mediation between the individual and the higher nation was reframed within the philosophical and political concept of universalism. It was argued that individual differences needed to be minimised in order to better unify the nation. However, this demand was problematic, as it meant that representations of difference became taboo and acknowledgement of difference was considered politically incorrect. Furthermore, this attitude ironically prevented public recognition of the fact that social distinctions—in other words, differences—made people unequal. Universalism thus became a useful tool to justify turning a blind eye to all types of inequalities.

It is important to note that this problematic outlook is not confined to a French context. The use of universalism in the critique of literature outside European

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<sup>266</sup> Scott, 'French Universalism', p. 69.

<sup>267</sup> Scott, 'French Universalism', p. 66.

<sup>268</sup> Scott, 'French Universalism', p. 67.

canons has also been greeted with scepticism.<sup>269</sup> Chinua Achebe, in his essay ‘Colonialist Criticism’, strongly challenges universalism in the criticism of African literature. To be universal, he explains, implies taking the ‘road which you may take if you travel out far enough in the direction of Europe or America, if you put adequate distance between yourself and your home’.<sup>270</sup> He further states that behind this idea of universalism is the assumption of a higher literary value: it is only after the writer has mastered certain rules that their work will be accepted and read from this universalist perspective. Whereas the work of pioneers of Western literature such as Philip Roth and John Updike is automatically thought to be universal, African literature is expected to move beyond what is considered its ‘pathetic obsession with racial and cultural confrontation [and the] easy antithesis between white and black’.<sup>271</sup> Universality, Achebe concludes, is a trait only of work with scarcely any degree of Africanness.<sup>272</sup>

We have seen how Glissant responded to such problematics by distinguishing between *mondialité* and *mondialisation*. Yet despite this attempt to reconcile the unexpected with the expected, the lack of consideration of the role of diasporic movement, histories of migration and affinities created and found in the space that Paul Gilroy has conceptualised as the black Atlantic hints at the lasting difficulty of recognising similarities within difference. I am not suggesting that Glissant’s theory does not acknowledge historical connections. ‘La Relation n’est

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<sup>269</sup> Justine McConnell, *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora Since 1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 32.

<sup>270</sup> Chinua Achebe, ‘Colonialist Criticism’, in *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (Oxford: Routledge, 1995), pp. 73-77 (p. 75).

<sup>271</sup> Achebe, p. 76.

<sup>272</sup> Achebe, p. 75.

pas d'étrangetés, mais de connaissance partagée. Nous pouvons dire maintenant que cette expérience du gouffre est la chose le mieux échangée', he writes.<sup>273</sup> The experience of the abyss, what he calls *le gouffre*, is the experience as well as the consequences of Africans' deportation to and enslavement in the Americas. This abyss is a space from which to think of Relation in connection to the history of forced removal and slavery, a history that resonates throughout the concept of Relation.<sup>274</sup> Yet Glissant's commitment to arbitrary encounters tends to present these connections as secondary, if not to nullify them: the role of (local) diasporic exchange, for example, is neutralised by too much attention to the global, the unrelated and unorganised. I believe that dub poetry is as much about the unexpected as the expected. Not to acknowledge these two types of encounters is to dismiss certain relations emerging from specific histories. As Kodwo Eshun remarks of black cultural practices, in dub poetry 'the idea of quotation and citation, the idea of ironic distance [...] doesn't work, [it's] far too literary'.<sup>275</sup> While Glissant's concept of Relation is a remarkable tool to 'sense' and 'cite' from multiple directions, making fixed categories obsolete, it must also include the realities of the circulation and connection of poetics in a black diasporic framework. Discussion of the poetics of dub must take into account cultural movements and encounters produced by both expected and unexpected

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<sup>273</sup> Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, p. 20. 'Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange' (translation from Glissant, *Poetics of Relation [Poétique de la Relation]*, trans. by Wing, p. 7).

<sup>274</sup> *Poétique de la Relation* opens with 'La Barque Ouverte' ('The Open Boat'), a chapter on the experience of the slave trade considered through the notion of Relation.

<sup>275</sup> Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 83. Original quote from Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), p. 188.

relationships. Gilroy's framework of the black Atlantic is used to balance these two dimensions in the specific history of dub poetry.

The concept of the black Atlantic is well known and extensively referenced. It is built upon a series of relationships, interdependencies and affinities across the black diaspora. In the triangle forged by the slave trade between Africa, Europe and the Americas, the black Atlantic creates a space for 'things' to cross borders, creating a network of affinities. With its narrative thread linking slavery, memory, exile and historical trauma, the black Atlantic offers a complex system for interpreting cultural movements and cultural formation. The conceptualisation of a black Atlantic adds the travelling aspect of dub poetry's specific relationships, affinities and interdependencies to the transnational dimension already assigned to its cultural context. The specificities of these various connections are understood through a combination of two seemingly oppositional terms: routes and roots. 'Routes' illustrates the importance of movement and mobility in this spatio-temporal cultural arena. The scattering of the black diaspora, a result of the economic politics of the slave trade, has created a multiplicity of routes where cultural elements can circulate. Multidirectional, they produce a web of connections where unexpected encounters happen. The notion of 'roots', on the other hand, is used to discuss cultural movements within organised forms of connectivity. Created through a series of recognised experiences, whether historical, cultural, social or economic, or even through physical identification, these relationships produce a sense of oneness and sameness.<sup>276</sup> People of the

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<sup>276</sup> Tommie Shelby, 'Foundations of Black Solidarity: Collective Identity or Common Oppression?', *Ethics*, 1122 (2002), pp. 231-266 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/779594>> [10 December 2013].

diaspora root cultural flux within a frame of identifiable references, creating a collective and transnational ‘we’. It is important to understand that the different processes of identification are arbitrary, depending on time, place and individual, who have ‘different rhythm[s] of living and being’.<sup>277</sup> Always in a process of becoming, identifications are consciously fashioned, designed with discursive means to achieve particular ends. The unifying notion of roots in the black Atlantic is not based on a ‘modernist linear progressivism and current projections of a continuous connection’.<sup>278</sup> As Gilroy explains:

Imagine a scenario in which similar – though not precisely identical – seeds take root in different places. Plants of the same species are seldom absolutely indistinguishable. Nature does not always produce interchangeable clones. Soils, nutrients, predators, pests, and pollination vary along with unpredictable weather.<sup>279</sup>

Dub poetry happens in the space of the black Atlantic. The narrative of slavery, memory and exile is a constitutive element of the poetics, with which the expression of the poetry is in constant dialogue. Dub poetry was born in the transnational space created by this traumatic history, whose echoes can still be heard today. It is one example of an expressive form that ‘arose as a product of the historical continuum encompassing European conquest, slavery, colonization, industrialization, urbanization and globalization in the so-called New World’.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 202.

<sup>278</sup> James Clifford, ‘Diasporas’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 9 (1994), pp. 302-338 (p. 317) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/656365>> [22 November 2014].

<sup>279</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 126.

<sup>280</sup> Veal, p. 26.

This cultural form not only illustrates but also engages with the particularities of this history. It is important to remember that the majority of dub poets wrote under the influence of Frantz Fanon's acclaimed *The Wretched of the Earth*, particularly its chapter 'Nation Culture'.<sup>281</sup> Fanon's analyses of colonised people and the relationship between oppressed and oppressor were used as benchmarks across different types of black liberation writing, such as dub poetry. The poetics of dub indeed show a strong consciousness of the consequences of the 'unspeakable terror' of black history.<sup>282</sup> Understanding diasporic movement and circulation is a difficult exercise that deserves particular attention. While Glissant's poetics of Relation is a precious commitment to a universal world and its chaotic aspect, Gilroy's black Atlantic connects movements and encounters to a specific context.

To continue elaborating an appropriate framework for understanding cultural encounters and movement, I would like to add theoretical resources found in the practice and structure of dub. Michael Veal explains that the stylistic traits of reverb, echoes and fragments have metaphorical dimensions with a theoretical underpinning: they offer ways to think about the historical consequences of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, including the black world's postcolonial position.<sup>283</sup> Dub emerged within a reggae and Rastafarian scene that was 'concerned with exploring the ancestral past'.<sup>284</sup> In those early years, the core of dub practice was

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<sup>281</sup> Austin, *Dread Poetry*, p. 100. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004). The original text is from the first publication, Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961).

<sup>282</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 73.

<sup>283</sup> Veal, p. 197.

<sup>284</sup> Veal, p. 199.

an ontological resistance to imposed Westernised systems of thought. Through sonic experimentation, such as the use of reverb, echoes, loops and delays, dub challenged conventional conceptions around the history of memory, slavery and exile. Veal explains that in this context, they can be seen as forms of remembrance and reverie, creating an alternative system with which to re-evaluate African cultural roots:

reverberation provided the cohering agent for dub's interplay of presence/absence and of completeness/incompleteness, evoking the intertwined experiences of exile and nostalgia.<sup>285</sup>

These two sonic effects allow new mental configurations of time and space. For Alexander Weheliye, dub effects make us 'reimagin[e] and morseliz[e] the supposed linearity of hegemonic time from the (aural) vantage point of the oppressed'.<sup>286</sup> With its constant use of musical rupture, dub remixes and reorganises the historical trauma of slavery and its aftermath in a different chronology: the bygone transatlantic slave trade is still present in the forms of echoes and reverbs in the contemporary world. Understood as one of Gilroy's 'unfinished forms', dub is an example of a structurally coded genre that not only engages but also illustrates the continuity of this historical reality in a nonlinear time frame.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Veal, p. 219. In 1976, Richard Williams published a short but prescient description of dub reggae music in the journal *Melody Maker*, with early comments on a dub aesthetic (Richard Williams, 'Dub and the Sound of Surprise', in *The Rock History Reader*, ed. Theo Cateforis (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 159-162).

<sup>286</sup> Weheliye, p. 104.

<sup>287</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 105. These 'unfinished forms' express unresolved psychic terror, as the 'unspeakable terrors' of black history invest a variety of art forms and practices with a narrative voice characterised by ruptures and fragments. They are 'mark[e]d indelibly as the products of slavery' and its unfinished consequences.

In this re-evaluation of African roots, the sonic fragments resulting from the sound engineer's deconstructive approach can similarly be interpreted as 'fragments of an African cultural memory under reconstruction'.<sup>288</sup> With the shattered narratives of its lyrics and the dropping in and out of its musical elements, dub offers a conceptual parallel that exposes and represents the history disrupted by the black Atlantic slave trade.<sup>289</sup> Finally, erasure is another tool in the practice of dub poetry for conceptualising the historical continuity of slavery, here recalling and re-creating the reality of forced erasures of cultural memory. Again quoting Veal:

In this line of reasoning, the privileging of rupture in dub music comes to symbolize the disruptions in cultural memory and the historical shattering of existential peace, encoded into the cultural nervous system and sublimated into musical sound.<sup>290</sup>

All of these technical tools bring an elasticity into the music, which becomes a space where linear conceptions of history can be challenged and history itself reimagined, reconfigured, reassembled according to an alternative logic. In establishing an interpretative framework for cultural movements and encounters, challenging predefined linearity is likewise an important move. Indeed, staying within linear conceptions encourages a neglect of thinking outside predefined categories, thereby fostering restrictive thoughts, as these conceptions are grounded in one-dimensionality. In response, the technical and conceptual tools found in the practice and structure of dub offer sophisticated ways to think about

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<sup>288</sup> Veal, p. 200.

<sup>289</sup> Veal, p. 205.

<sup>290</sup> Veal, p. 206.

complex modes of connectivity. This reorganisation of sound according to and resulting in new forms of connections finds echoes in Glissant's concept of opacity. The sound engineer challenges the listener's pre-given reception by changing the song's structure through the continuous act of versioning. Going in unexpected directions, a dub version disrupts the original song's predefined organisation. The dub's various sonic effects create a density that also perturbs the listener's act of understanding, of making sense of the song, challenging the limits of the audience's perception. This space of incomprehension is a space of opacity, where the fragmented and unfinished history of the slave trade can be sonically expressed while resisting reductive interpretations. The practice of dub, embedded with specific cultural codes, uses its right to opacity to keep the complexity of this history of the black Atlantic outside a controlling mode of understanding.

The considerations presented above offer the means to discover and interrogate dialogic encounters between theoretical and creative materials, artistic choices and conceptual offerings, which are necessary for the close readings that follow. These various theoretical resources from which I borrow elements are best used in dialogue not only with literary texts but also with one another. This chapter has introduced conceptual links between theoretical materials in order to create interpretative frameworks adapted to the complex network of cultural movements and encounters that have shaped the poetics of dub poetry.

# Part II

## Chapter 4: Between musical meter and poetic rhythm

For artists and critics alike, rhythm—or ‘riddim’, to use the Jamaican pronunciation—is a key element that defines dub poetry. In Michael Smith’s writing process, for instance,

Sometimes a rhythm come to me first [...] And then me try to remember the rhythm ... and then I build up under that and me breaks and the bridges. Just like how a musician works out.<sup>291</sup>

Similarly, Oku Onuora explains that in dub poetry,

what basically is done, is that you dub ‘in’ the riddim into the poem. [...] The poem itself is riddim. It’s constructed in that way. You achieve sound in poetry through riddim, rhyme, alliteration, you name it. So I use these basic standard poetry principles and techniques to create a particular riddim that I need.<sup>292</sup>

For some critics, ‘musical accompaniment is not as important to dub poetry as hearing the reggae rhythm in the poem’.<sup>293</sup> Rhythm is indeed such an important

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<sup>291</sup> Bousquet, ‘Dub Poetry: une Étude de l’Oralittérature dans les Poèmes de Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, Linton Kwesi Johnson et Benjamin Zephaniah’, p. 261.

<sup>292</sup> Habekost, pp. 127-128.

<sup>293</sup> Johnson, ‘Remembering Michael Smith’, p. 156, quoting Edward J. Chamberlin, *Come Back to Me My Language* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 235. Here, LKJ refers particularly to Mervyn Morris and J. Edward Chamberlin.

feature of the poetry that it has become almost the ‘the sole foundation of the dub poem’s appeal’.<sup>294</sup>

In a reggae context, ‘riddim’ has different meanings. As discussed in chapter 1, the dub version of an original reggae song is also called a riddim version. It has the basic structure of the original song, with a specific chord progression and/or bass line and drumming. Amongst musicians and singers, this riddim functions like a jazz standard, over which they can improvise to create different versions. *Riddim* can also refer to the rhythmic pulse created by the combination of the bass and the drum in the song’s basic structure.<sup>295</sup> In a live session, when a singer gives instructions to the musicians, he or she might use the term ‘riddim’ or ‘riddim section’ to have only the piano and the guitar, both rhythm section instruments, play. In contrast, ‘drum and bass’ or ‘rub a dub’ is used when only the drum and the bass are to play. Finally, *riddim* can mean a song’s recognised rhythmic pulse.<sup>296</sup> In the practice of dub poetry, ‘dubbing in the riddim’ means using the voice to bring this pulse into the performance, by following the rhythmic pattern of the instruments. By reproducing the close relationship between the drum and the bass, the poet ‘rides’ the rhythm in continuation of the DJs’ artistic practice.

Over the years, the centrality of rhythm in this poetry has been taken as a sign of African roots. This is not too surprising, as rhythm is often seen as an intrinsic

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<sup>294</sup> Rohlehr, ‘Introduction’, p. 18.

<sup>295</sup> Veal, p. 62.

<sup>296</sup> For an insightful discussion of riddim as a production method, see Peter Manuel and Wayne Marshall, ‘The Riddim Method: Aesthetics, Practice, and Ownership in Jamaican Dancehall’, *Popular Music*, 25 (2006), pp. 447-470 <[http://www.wayneandwax.com/academic/manuel-marshall\\_riddim-method.pdf](http://www.wayneandwax.com/academic/manuel-marshall_riddim-method.pdf)> [14 June 2019 ], and Ray Hitchins, *Vibe Merchants: The Sound Creators of Jamaican Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

element of African culture.<sup>297</sup> Although the music has changed and developed its own distinctive features, there is still an idea that it has preserved an African-derived rhythm which has remained the same over the centuries. This view influences most of the academic approaches to dub poetry's rhythmic dimension. Even when updated theories of diasporic mechanism are taken into account, rhythm, in its multiple adaptations and transformations, continues to function as a grounding site of connections and references to African cultures. In Elizabeth Wheeler's words, 'When one listens to dub poetry it is the rhythm that strikes the ear as clearly African'.<sup>298</sup>

It is not difficult to see how discussions of retained African rhythm can fall into problematic essentialist categories, based on the idea of authentic and natural characteristics. Such trains of thought could easily drift into racist stereotypes. Yet it is also important to realise that the idea of the poetry's rhythmic dimension as a key characteristic of an African heritage is not only imposed from above, by society and by critics. It is also articulated and used by poets, writers and other intellectuals to construct a particular identity and image. The poet Langston Hughes explains:

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<sup>297</sup> For a discussion of various associations of 'African rhythm', see Kofi Agawu, 'The Invention of "African Rhythm"', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 48 (1995), pp. 380-395 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3519832>> [29 November 2017]. The use of rhythm in discussions of traces of Africanness is of course more complex than a simple question of cultural association. By briefly mentioning this association between rhythm and Africa, I want to draw a parallel with the tendency to see dub poetry through the lens of ancient African oral traditions. This echoes the discussion of roots and routes, of horizontal and vertical ties in diasporic communities, presented in the introduction of this dissertation's theoretical framework in chapter 3.

<sup>298</sup> Elizabeth A. Wheeler, 'Riddym Ravings: Female and National Identity in Jamaican Creole Poetry', in *Imagination, Emblems and Expressions: Essays on Latin American, Caribbean, and Continental Culture and Identity*, ed. Helen Ryan-Ranson (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993) (p. 142).

I was the Class Poet. [...] There was no one in our class who looked like a poet, or had ever written a poem. [...] In America most white people think, of course, that *all* Negroes can sing and dance, and have a sense of rhythm. So my classmates, knowing that a poem had to have rhythm, elected me unanimously – thinking, no doubt, that I had some, being a Negro.<sup>299</sup>

The above quote illustrates a self-fulfilling prophecy in which rhythm is connected to an African past. Dub poetry is no exception to this kind of prophecy. The predominance of rhythm has ideological motivations. In the general search for an aesthetic that truly corresponds to the lived reality of Caribbeans, rhythm is a place where poets can explore and propose alternatives, moving away from colonial norms and expectations. It allows the exploration of connections outside European traditions and hence, connection with the history of African presence in the New World. The reappropriation and valorisation of rhythm becomes a strategy of decolonisation, a means of expressing a decolonised aesthetic. In his *History of the Voice*, discussed in chapter 2, Brathwaite considers the rhythmic structure created by iambic pentameter and used to define literary canons as a symbol of colonial superiority. In order to move away from such imposed norms, poets have to find a different rhythm, one that correspond to their reality. Iambic pentameter is the rhythm of snow, which falls in European landscapes. ‘The hurricane’, however, proper to the Caribbean, ‘does not roar in pentameters’.<sup>300</sup> In the documentary *Upon Westminster Bridge*, Michael Smith’s conversation with LKJ and CLR James illustrates a similar rejection of the colonial rhythm found in

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<sup>299</sup> Vettorato, p. 578, quoting Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), p. 24.

<sup>300</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 10.

the canons of English poetry. To LKJ's question about how he responded to English literature, he answered: 'I couldn't relate much to it, because the symbols and the rhythm were out'.<sup>301</sup> The dub poets found alternative rhythms in music. As Onuora explains:

[In a dub poem,] you can dub een a South African riddim, you can dub een a kumina riddim, you can dub een a nyabinghi riddim, you can dub een a jazz riddim, you can dub een a funk riddim, you can dub een, you can dub!<sup>302</sup>

Dub poetry is a literary form that rejects iambic pentameter as a canonic structure. Quoting Onuora again: dub poetry 'is dubbing out the little penta-metre and the little highfalutin business and dubbing in the rootsical, yard, basic rhythm that I-an-I know'.<sup>303</sup> Despite the variety mentioned above, the 'basic rhythm that I-an-I know' is mainly found in reggae music. It is true that music and poetry share a recognised rhythm and sonority. It is also undeniably true that dub poetry and reggae share a recognised rhythm. Onuora explains that 'when the poem is read without any reggae rhythm (so to speak) backing, one can distinctly hear the

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<sup>301</sup> *Upon Westminster Bridge* (1982). dir. Anthony Wall. BBC. 1982 [DVD].

<sup>302</sup> Habekost, p. 4, quoted in Adugo's Bachelor thesis, 'Dub Poetry: An Examination of the Origins, Construct and Development of a Unique Jamaican Indigenous Art'. Kumina (or cumina, cumuna, crumuna) is an Afro-Jamaican folk tradition including secular ceremonies, dance and music. It has strong African roots, specifically Congolese. Kumina rhythm is the name of a drumming style in the music that accompanied its spiritual ceremonies. This style became popular in urban Kingston, especially in the music of Rastas. It is characterised by a 'fast tempo and rhythm that seem to provoke excessive pelvic thrust' (Yoshiko S. Nagashima, *Rastafarian Music in Contemporary Jamaica: A Study of Socioreligious Music of the Rastafarian Movement in Jamaica* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1984), p. 68). Nyabinghi is the gathering of Rastafarian people to commemorate and celebrate key dates in their faith. These commemorations have a particular drumming style, played by three drums: the bass drum, used to keep the time, and the higher-pitched funde and repeater. Each of these has a specific role (for more details, see Moskowitz V. David, *Caribbean Popular Music: An Encyclopedia of Reggae, Mento, Ska, Rock Steady, and Dancehall* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp. 222-223).

<sup>303</sup> Okuo Onuora, cited in Mervyn Morris, 'Is English we speaking' and other essays (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999), p. 253.

reggae rhythm coming out of the poem'.<sup>304</sup> An audience familiar with the reggae style will notice this rhythmic correspondence. However, this strong rhythmic relationship has not always been accepted. For Jean 'Binta' Breeze, for instance, this connection became a constraint, putting her poetry in the straightjacket of an imposed rhythm.<sup>305</sup> In her poem 'Dubbed Out', she confesses:

i  
search  
for words  
moving  
in their music  
not  
broken  
by  
the  
beat

Rohler notes in the introduction to the anthology *Voiceprint* that in adopting a reggae rhythm, the poetry can be 'at its worst a kind of tedious jabber to a monotonous rhythm'. They thus invite critics, but also poets, to consider other poetic qualities, such as 'subtle variations in tone, pace'.<sup>306</sup> For Kwame Dawes,

Dub poetry [...] in its dogged adherence to the reggae back-beat, quite often phrasing in ways which are counter to the natural rhythms of speech, can sound as if it has been stretched awkwardly to find its way into the grooves of the music. In time, the rhythmic patterns of some dub poetry became quite predictable and standardised.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Brown, 'Dub Poetry: Selling Out', p. 51.

<sup>305</sup> Jean Breeze, cited in Cooper, p. 68.

<sup>306</sup> Rohlehr, 'Introduction', p. 18.

<sup>307</sup> Kwame Dawes, *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1999), p. 88. It is important to note that although this quote suggests a negative reception of dub poetry, it only illustrates a common misinterpretation of the poetry's complex use of rhythm. Throughout his criticism, Dawes has shown himself rather enthusiastic about dub poetry.

The above quotes share a common criticism: First, as the poets fit their words to the music, they lose rhythmic freedom. The rhythm of their poetic lines becomes ‘quite predictable and standardised’, in Dawes’s words, as they follow the regular structure of the musical accompaniment. Honor Ford-Smith’s comments on Smith’s assiduous preparation and rehearsal before performing is a window onto the meticulous organisation of words in the dub poetry tradition:

He would work hours and hours, sometimes the whole day, with his tape recorder which would have the backing tracks for the music, trying out different variations of rhythm. He was very very conscious of the variety that he could get in his voice. And you hear it in the voice, and you hear his consciousness of pace, when you listen to his recording, and when you hear him perform you would hear that he had worked for hours on the pacing of his poetry, you know.

So it wasn’t just something that he improvised when he got on stage.<sup>308</sup>

Second, there is the idea that dub poets awkwardly stretch their words in order to get into what Dawes refers to as ‘the grooves of the music’. The fusion of word and music subordinates the poetry to the instrumental track. Such shortcut conclusions are not too surprising, as they reflect a general confusion around rhythm and metre. In *Traité du rythme*, Gérard Dessons and Henri Meschonnic note :

Le rythme est un mouvement, non un compte. Étymologiquement un flux. La métrique est un moyen de mesurer ce flux et une mesure de ce flux. C'est toute

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<sup>308</sup> Honor Ford-Smith, one of Michael Smith’s tutors when he was at the Jamaican School of Drama, interviewed by Mervyn Morris (Mervyn Morris, ‘Mikey Smith, Dub Poet’, *Jamaica Journal*, 18 (1985), pp. 39-42 (p. 41). Part of the interview is available online, Mervyn Morris, ‘Mikey Smith’. The Mikey Smith Raw Works Festival. Blog. Available at <<https://mikeysmithfestival.wordpress.com/about/mikey-smith/>> [24 September 2017].

l'histoire de la notation du rythme qui explique la fusion, jusqu'à ne plus faire la différence entre ces deux notions distinctes, le rythme et sa mesure.<sup>309</sup>

When music and words are combined, the poetry's rhythm is viewed through the lens of the musical accompaniment's metric structure. This perspective blurs or even ignores the distinction between rhythm in the poetic lines and metre in the musical lines. From this general stance, which approaches music and poetry from the same angle, 'dub poetry is, in fact, the fusion of reggae rhythms with the practice of the spoken word'.<sup>310</sup> This is obviously a reductive analysis, which consequently misses the subtle shifts in rhythm found throughout the variety of examples that this poetic tradition offers. As LKJ explains:

Some of the poetry that I've done over the years I've written within the parameters of the reggae structure, and others have gone against that and I've tried to make the music subservient to the verse, rather than the other way around.<sup>311</sup>

This quote hints at the poet's concern about diversity of rhythm. In the following paragraphs, I use the parameters of reggae structure to analysis this diversity in the rhythm of the poetics. Through a close reading of LKJ's 'Five Nights of Bleeding (For Leroy Harris)', this chapter provides a thorough understanding of the rhythmic shifts both within this poem and across different versions of it. I will

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<sup>309</sup> Gérard Desson and Henri Meschonnic, *Traité du Rythme: Des Vers et des Proses* (Paris: Dunod, 1998), p. 24. 'Rhythm is a movement, not a count. Etymologically a flow. Metrics is a means of measuring this flow and a measure of this flow. It is the whole history of rhythm notation that explains the fusion, until one can no longer distinguish between these two distinct notions, the rhythm and its measurement.'

<sup>310</sup> Cooper and Devonish, p. 70.

<sup>311</sup> Eric Beaumont, 'Black Power, People's Power: A Conversation With Linton Kwesi Johnson'. 29 March 2011. Blog. Available at <<http://dopefolksrecords.blogspot.com/2011/03/conversation-with-linton-kwesi-johnson.html>> [16 January 2019].

discuss the creativity of the poet's skilful manipulation of this recognised rhythm. Moving between written and musical versions, the following paragraphs also propose a long-overdue analysis of rhythm outside the lasting confusion between rhythm and metre. Indeed, the print version, by showing how rhythm is conveyed and perceived through the written word, allows for discussion of rhythm independent of the musical accompaniment. As I compare all of these versions, I further argue that rhythm is specific to a poem and varies across performances as elements are added, removed and changed. Moving from the page to an early live recording and then to the studio release, we will see that rhythm adapts to the constraints but also to the possibilities of each new artistic context. The text version is the published poem found in LKJ's *Dread Beat & Blood* (1975). It is a reprinted version from the poem's first appearance in LKJ's first book *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974). The early live performance was captured in the documentary *Dread Beat and Blood*, directed by Franco Rosso and released in 1979. In this version, the poet is accompanied by drums, a bass guitar and a rhythm guitar. This instrumentation is probably close to that of LKJ's early dub poetry, created with the band Rasta Love. The final version is the studio recording released in 1978 on the album *Dread Beat an' Blood*, credited to the Poet and the Roots—LKJ and the accompanying band.<sup>312</sup>

## Revising Attridge's theoretical framework

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<sup>312</sup> Although the album was released prior to the documentary, recording the poems in a studio was the second stage in the artistic development of dub poetry. At first, LKJ performed his poetry live over a backing tape, then accompanied by Rasta Love's drums. As mentioned in chapter 1, it was only after meeting Dennis Bovell that he went into the studio.

In order to prepare the ground for the close reading, the ideas of rhythm and metre need some clarification. The theoretical resources in Derek Attridge's analysis of popular verses paired with music, such as rap lyrics, are particularly useful.<sup>313</sup> Indeed, his approach provides a valuable interpretative framework that addresses musical metre and poetic rhythm as two separate elements that are nonetheless intimately related through the performance of the poetry. Within the music's metric structure, poets manipulate their words to find possibilities of rhythmic variation. Attridge explains that an accurate understanding of rhythm looks at 'the way the performance to some degree reflects, to some degree deforms, both the natural rhythms of the language and the metronomic beat of the accompaniment'.<sup>314</sup> I interrogate the different versions of 'Five Nights of Bleeding' to show variations in the organisation of music and words. The metronomic beat is found in the regular metric structure of reggae music. In the absence of music, reggae rhythm still 'comes out of' dub poetry's words, as we saw in Onuora's quote above. This reggae rhythm, or reggae metric, to use more appropriate terminology, provides a frame of analysis for the poetic line and its rhythmic diversity.

In *Poetic Rhythm*, Attridge explains that

rhythm is a patterning of energy simultaneously produced and perceived; a series of alternations of build-up and release, movement and counter-

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<sup>313</sup> Dub poetry shares certain characteristics with rap: it is a form of popular verse whose lines, like those of rap, are based on rhythm rather than melody. Moreover, both combine words and music. Attridge's analytical framework can hence be used to discuss dub poetry.

<sup>314</sup> Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 93.

movement, tending toward regularity but complicated by constant variations and local inflections.<sup>315</sup>

Rhythm, in other words, is the production and perception of different acoustic elements based on temporal relationships. It is not the organisation of these acoustic elements through time. Often wrongly assimilated to regularity, rhythm is in fact continuously complicated by variations. A sound occurring every two seconds and a sound occurring every ten seconds have the same rhythm. These rhythms differ in speed, which, in musical terminology, is their tempo. Their ‘felt energy’, however, is the same: they are received as having the same rhythm. Metre, on the other hand, is the organisation of rhythm, in both poetry and music, into a regular pattern. When a rhythm occurs regularly, it can be perceived and turned into a metre. Its repetitive patterns can be counted and named, like those of a metre. Reggae’s metrical structure is usually based on common time, which is a regular quadruple division per bar. It is indicated with the time signature 4/4. In this common time, one musical bar, which can be used as a musical unit, is filled with four quarters, each creating the time ratio of one beat. Not all beats have the same function. The first and third are known as main beats, the second and fourth as offbeats.<sup>316</sup> In reggae, the offbeats are emphasised, bringing an identifiable rhythmic pattern with a syncopated feeling into the music. This pattern is called ‘one-drop’ rhythm and was developed in the 1970s. Within the constraints of this structure—the music’s metre—each instrument expresses rhythm differently. In the percussion section, it is very common for the hi-hat to subdivide each beat of

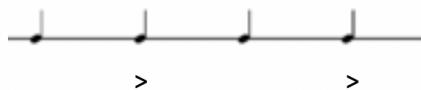
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<sup>315</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 19.

<sup>316</sup> I use the terms ‘strong’ and ‘main’ interchangeably; likewise, ‘weak’, ‘secondary’ and ‘offbeat’.

the 4/4 bar into 3/8, or three quavers, in order to produce a tension between binary and ternary divisions.<sup>317</sup> This friction creates a swing effect, which is also found in jazz. The effect is further emphasised when the organ plays semiquavers on the offbeats. Alternatively, the percussion section can play the beat subdivision straight, which means dividing it into two equal quavers. The snare and the bass drum both hit the second and fourth beats of this quadruple division, emphasising the offbeat of the 4/4 structure. In the rhythm section, the guitar and the piano also usually play the second half, the offbeat, of each beat. Heard on the quavers of 4/4, they bring into the music a distinctive syncopated feeling known as ‘the skank’. The bass guitar plays a repetitive melodic pattern that loops throughout the song. It is intimately linked to the one-drop rhythm, accentuating the pattern by playing either with or against it.

It is in the interactions of these musical elements, occurring within the regularity of the 4/4 metric structure, that rhythm finds its full complexity while also giving the song its distinctive reggae feel. These comments point to three levels of analysis reflecting the alternation of beat and offbeat that characterises reggae’s metric. On the level of the bar, the one-drop rhythm is created by the kick and snare drum hitting beats 2 and 4:



The skank is similarly on these beats, but on the second half of each. Finally, the organ plays the offbeat of the second and fourth beats:

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<sup>317</sup> See, for instance, drummers such as Carlton Barrett, Horsemouth Wallace, Santa Davis, Fil Callender and Mikey Boo for examples of this subtle ambiguity between binary and ternary divisions.



I use these three levels to analyse poetic rhythm in relation to the music behind it.

Basing his theoretical framework on this distinction between metre and rhythm, Attridge too analyses the relationship of words and music within a four-beat structure. He explains that this relationship uses parallel parameters, so the organisation of the poetic lines can be understood from the metric structure of the music, i.e. the four-beat organisation of the musical accompaniment.<sup>318</sup> He then uses the notions of main beat and offbeat in music and stressed and unstressed syllables in speech to show how the complex interactions of words and music produce variations in the rhythm of the poetics. A beat, he explains, is ‘a burst of energy that is part of a repeating and structured pattern.’<sup>319</sup> Although the use of the word ‘energy’ in his definitions of both rhythm and beat can be confusing, a beat is simply the regular pulse in a song or a poem, creating the feeling of a pattern. Beats, in other words, are the moments when the audience or the reader wants to clap the hands, snap the fingers or tap the foot while reading or listening to the work. As Attridge’s framework recognises, the four-beat structure is a common feature of both music and language. In English speech, beats occur ‘when the series of stressed and unstressed syllables approaches a

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<sup>318</sup> This correspondence between musical structure and poetic line is found across a wide range of popular musics. It is not exclusive to rap or dub poetry.

<sup>319</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 8.

degree of regularity in its alternation'.<sup>320</sup> Attridge argues that in popular verse, the music's four-beat structure is also found in the poetry. In situations where this correspondence is altered by the presence of only three beats in the words, an extra beat is added to the poetic line, usually at the end. These extra beats are referred to as virtual beats, 'since they are not actually present in the words of the verse even though they make themselves rhythmically felt'.<sup>321</sup> In such a prosodic schema, it is easy to assume that the beat of the music will correspond to the stressed syllables of the poem and vice versa, that the offbeat will similarly correspond to the unstressed syllables. In fact, criticism of dub poetry has commonly used this predictable organisation to denounce the form's standardisation. While it is true that this popular poetic form demonstrates metric regularity, critics have failed to recognise that, within its periodic structure, the organisation of stressed and unstressed syllables sometimes reflects and sometimes clashes with the expected pattern.

Even though Attridge offers innovative ways to approach dub poetry's rhythmic dimension, his theoretical tools are very much word-oriented and fail to address music with equally precise analysis. In the introduction to *Moving Words*, he explains:

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<sup>320</sup> Derek Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 4. Because conversational speech departs from this pattern, Attridge's framework is restricted to a context of controlled regular metre, as in poetry or song lyrics.

<sup>321</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 58.

Precision in matters of language was the aim of the discipline of linguistics, and it was to linguistics that I turned to try to work out for myself how best to account for the varieties of verse to be found in English.<sup>322</sup>

Considering its importance in the advancement of his theory, it is rather surprising that music is not better represented. Because his methodology tends to be too schematic, Attridge fails to notice variations and changes in the relationship between words and music. As this chapter's close reading will demonstrate, a precise look at the music reveals an unexpected organisation of the words. Moreover, this inattention to music has also resulted in a lack of appropriate vocabulary to address both music and words in similarly convincing ways. This absence of proper language is a reality of the larger academic field focusing on poetry, music and their interaction. Thus, to best apply Attridge's theoretical resources to the following close reading, I adapt his interpretative framework in order to visualise the presence of music. My analysis of rhythm in the poetics is framed by a discussion of beat and offbeat in music and stressed and unstressed syllables in words. Going into the details of the musical accompaniment, I use the three levels of beat and offbeat—semibreve, minim and crochet—to examine how the poet organises his voice in a musical context. I argue that the poet uses the characteristics of reggae music, sometimes felt as constraints, as sources of inspiration for developing rhythm in the poem's performance.

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<sup>322</sup> Attridge, *Moving Words*, p. 2.

## 'Five Nights of Bleeding (For Leroy Harris)'

'Five Nights of Bleeding' is LKJ's first published poem. It appears at the end of his first and only play, *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, and was republished in 1975 in his poem collection *Dread Beat and Blood*.<sup>323</sup> This analysis uses the written text of the second publication. The poem is representative of an artistic phase that LKJ calls 'urgency of expression'.<sup>324</sup> In this period he was strongly influenced by reggae culture and sound systems. He experimented with both the grammar and the pronunciation of Jamaican language. The poem is divided into six stanzas. As LKJ himself explains in introducing many performances, 'Five Nights of Bleeding' talks about a number of violent incidents in the young black music community in South London. The events of the first two nights happened at dances DJ'ed by Sofrano B and Neville King's sound systems. The setting of the third night was a concert by James Brown at the Rainbow in Finsbury Park, London. This was followed by a private party, a blues dance, on the fourth night. The poem concludes with a fifth night of rebellious war at the Telegraph, a pub in Brixton Hill where reggae was played. It is set around 1973 and was written for Leroy Harris, who was stabbed to death during one of these five nights of bleeding.<sup>325</sup>

The poem is a window onto LKJ's social environment, and violence runs

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<sup>323</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (London: Race Today Publications, 1974); Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle L'Uouverture, 1975).

<sup>324</sup> LKJ divides his career into three parts: 'urgency of expression' in the 1970s, 'learning my craft' in the 1980s and 'finding my voice' in the 1990s (see the introduction to this reading, *Linton Kwesi Johnson's 'Five Nights of Bleeding' - Ephemeropterae, Lopud*. 2017. Available at <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGR6d\\_hsaKk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGR6d_hsaKk)> [20 December 2017]).

<sup>325</sup> These pieces of information are given in the explanatory notes that accompany the poem at the end of LKJ's *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, p. 107.

throughout it both literally and symbolically. These poetics resonate with Frantz Fanon's view of violence expressed in *The Wretched of the Earth*. As LKJ notes:

I was trying to relate the Fanonist ideas about violence in the process of de-colonisation to my particular situation here, seeing a lot of internecine warfare going on between the youths of my generation.<sup>326</sup>

The mechanism and use of violence in Fanon's process of emancipation is a complex phenomenon that can only be recalled here. In his chapter 'Concerning Violence', violence by the oppressed has a cleansing effect. The passage is worth quoting at length:

For the native, life can only materialize from the rotting cadaver of the colonist. [...] But it so happens that for the colonized people this violence is invested with positive, formative features because it constitutes their only work. This violent praxis is totalizing since each individual represents a violent link in the great chain, in the almighty body of violence rearing up in reaction to the primary violence of the colonizer. Factions recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible. The armed struggle mobilizes the people, i.e., it pitches them in a single direction, from which there is no turning back.<sup>327</sup>

At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonised of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence.

This view had a tremendous impact on the revolutionary writing of the late 1970s, shaping the expression of a whole generation of anti-colonial writers and

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<sup>326</sup> Caesar, 'Linton Kwesi Johnson Talks to Burt Caesar', p. 66.

<sup>327</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Philcox, pp. 50-51.

thinkers confronted by the ongoing reality of racial and class injustices produced by colonisation. In the unresolved confrontation between the coloniser and the colonised, Fanon explains that the colonised native exorcises anger and anxiety through violence—often directed at other oppressed, marginalised and alienated groups. In this vicious circle, the oppressed, who have suffered violence at the hands of the oppressors, now wield it, producing a massive and self-destructive force: ‘Violence among the colonized will spread in proportion to the violence exerted by the colonial regime’.<sup>328</sup>

The poem shows these inward and outward mechanisms of violence. Violence shapes the interaction between the sufferers and the police. It also shapes the relationships amongst the people involved in these five nights. It functions on a collective level, its self-destructive force running through the community. It corresponds to the fratricidal phase of Fanon’s unleashed anger and anxiety. The violence of colonial oppression has been internalised by its sufferers, for whom it now represents a form of impossible liberation. Indeed, extending the dialectic between the colonisers and the dispossessed to the in-group, the sufferers turn their violence inward, redirecting it towards members of the same oppressed group. Very little has been written on Fanon’s impact on LKJ’s early work. This is rather surprising, considering the omnipresence of blood and anger in the latter’s poetic expression. This lack of attention is partly due to a general tendency to downplay the important creative and productive role that violence has had in

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<sup>328</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Philcox, p. 47. David Austin explains, ‘Violence is a way of venting pent-up frustrations and anger within the limited means that are at the colonials’ disposal. Unable to directly confront its enemy in a coherent and organized way, the sufferers turn on themselves for muscular and psychological release’ (Austin, *Dread Poetry*, p. 88).

literary contexts such as dub poetry. Fanon's provocative and revolutionary tone makes it easy to fall into narrow analyses with contentious claims that either promote or reject his views. The point is not to agree or disagree but rather to realise the creative potential that his theorisation of violence offered to the poetics of dub poetry. As David Austin rightly suggests, there is a dramatic tension in Fanon's writing on violence that might have been attractive to writers of LKJ's generation.<sup>329</sup> The attraction would have been not only to Fanon's views on violence but also to his use of language, providing ready-made poetic expressions. The poet's interest in violence thus concerned not only its physical consequences but also the way that words are used. 'Five Nights of Bleeding' depicts the presence of violence on a physical as well as a linguistic level.

### Rhythm on the page

The close reading starts with the published version of the poem.<sup>330</sup> On the page, Attridge reminds us, no poem has only one correct mode of rhythmic delivery. The written text allows a number of different realisations.<sup>331</sup> The analysis proposed here is therefore only one example in this range of possibilities. The poem is written in free verse. The use of free verse often derives from a desire to break from a tradition of metrical verse. It emphasises individual expressiveness.<sup>332</sup> In dub poetry, the use of free verse can indeed demonstrate a distance from traditional metrical structures, such as iambic pentameter, discussed above. Each

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<sup>329</sup> Austin, *Dread Poetry*, p. 89.

<sup>330</sup> Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>331</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. xx.

<sup>332</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 167.

stanza of ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ is organised differently, and the poetic lines vary greatly in length. In this irregularity, the rhythm is more difficult to feel. Yet in order to suggest and guide the reader into a specific poetic rhythm, the poet exploits the characteristics of written text. Punctuation, syntax and even graphics are used to rhythmically animate the reader’s encounter with the poem. Lynn Truss, in *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, notes that one ‘distinct function’ of modern punctuation is ‘to point up—rather in the manner of musical notation—such literary qualities as rhythm, direction, pitch, tone and flow’.<sup>333</sup> Punctuation is there to tell ‘the reader how to hum the tune’.<sup>334</sup> Indeed, from the very first lines of LKJ’s poem, it guides the reader through the text. Other published versions are punctuated differently. The version in *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, for instance, keeps only the suspended dots after ‘madness’, the final stop after each stanza and the exclamation mark after ‘smash’ in ‘night number five’. The rest of the poem is without punctuation.

Although, like musical notation, punctuation can be interpreted in multiple ways, its presence on the page brings along a set of recognised characteristics and connotations that influence our interpretation. It is commonly assumed that a period, a semicolon or an ellipsis is a signpost of a specific intention. Suspension points in the middle of a line, for instance, can suggest breaks and pauses between the words. A semicolon or full stops at the end of a line similarly suggests a pause or break before the next line. The different pause lengths of a full stop, a semicolon and an ellipsis, however, depend on the reader’s personal interpretation.

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<sup>333</sup> Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (Gotham Books: New York, 2004), p. 70.

<sup>334</sup> Truss, p. 71.

'Five Nights of Bleeding' starts with a stanza of twelve lines. Periods after 'hot-blast', 'bleeding' and 'stabblings' encourage an organisation of 3-1 / 3-1 / 2-2:

madness ... madness ...  
madness tight on the heads of the rebels;  
the bitterness erupts like a hot-blast.  
                        Broke glass;  
rituals of blood on the burning,  
served with a cruel in-fighting;  
five nights of horror and of bleeding.  
                        Broke glass;  
cold blades as sharp as the eyes of hate  
and the stabblings.  
It's war amongst the rebels:  
madness... madness... war.

Despite the lines' different lengths, there is a regular organisation that structures the stanza. Moreover, chains of 's' and 'b' sounds in the initial lines (madness-heads-rebels, bitterness-blast-broke-glass, blood-burning-bleeding) and line-ending words that end in 'ing' are key devices that structure the text, producing a certain rhythm. In this first stanza, organisation and repetition create a flow in the reader's encounter of the text.

'Night number three', on the other hand, is not organised around a particular structure. Each line has a different length. There is no rhyme scheme and no repetitive pattern. It is tempting to think that the reader's experience of rhythm is weakened by this irregularity. Nonetheless, this stanza too uses visual devices such as layout, punctuation and design to keep the reader in the poem's rhythm. Almost every line ends with a punctuation mark. As already mentioned, this is a useful tool for organising, but also for creating a reading flow. Only the end of the eighth line does not use punctuation:

so with a flick  
of the wrist,  
a jab and a stab,

Just as punctuation indicates an intention, its absence is similarly illustrative of a deliberate choice. The absence of a comma after 'flick' hints at a different relationship in the connection between this line and the next. Because the reader is invited to not pause here, this suggests a continuity, confirmed by the passage's semantic meaning. There is no stop after 'flick', and these two lines could be rewritten as one: 'so with a flick of the wrist'. Within this stanza, the enjambment here is questionable: the length of that single (combined) line would better correspond to those of the other lines. This run-on line creates a visual contrast that expresses a change of organisation, and consequently of rhythm. Following the punctuation, reading this passage aloud produces a clear shift of rhythm. This change of layout is therefore used to introduce a new rhythm, produced by dividing the line into smaller units. The repetition of the vowel 'i' in the first two lines and the 'a' in the third, as well as the rhyme there, also intensify the reader's perception of this new rhythm. They create a mirroring effect, bringing a sort of swing into the line:

so with a flick – of the wrist,  
a jab – and a stab,

The following lines have another shift of rhythm. In the echoes of this swing, the poet introduces a ternary pulse, indicated below by brackets. Once again, syntax and word organisation mark this shift. The repetitions of the preposition 'of', the verb 'was' and the line ending '-ed' are structural elements that guide the reader into this new rhythm:

[the song] [of blades] [was sounded,  
[the bile] [of oppression] [was vomited,  
[and two] [policemen] [wounded.  
[Righteous] [righteous] [war]

The period after ‘wounded’ groups the first three lines here into a unit of three. In the final line, the word ‘righteous’ is repeated in order to have a line of three words, reaffirming this ternary rhythm. Interestingly, this three-word structure appears in a single earlier line, ‘babylonian tyrants descended’. Where it functions as a hint to the reader of this coming rhythmic shift. Moreover, capital letters, also present in other stanzas, invite the reader to explore different reading modes:

right outside the RAINBOW:  
inside JAMES BROWN was screaming soul

There is no right or wrong way to interpret this case modification. It can suggest a louder reading, mirroring James Brown’s ‘screaming soul’. It can also hint at a variation of pace produced by a different articulation, one suggested by the visual emphasis that capital letters place on these words. Responding to this new element, the reader more carefully articulates ‘Rainbow’ and ‘James Brown’, thus slowing down the reading. The focus on the club the Rainbow and the singer James Brown makes them pivotal elements in the interpretation of this passage. In the third night, there is a clear distinction between the inside and the outside worlds. Outside is the place where ‘the bile of oppression is vomited’. Babylon and the rebellious youths are in violent confrontation. It is the oppressed against the oppressors. Inside, however, the presence of the police is restricted. This space is represented by the club the Rainbow. There, James Brown spreads his message and calls for freedom and black power. The Rainbow and James Brown, with their capitalised letters, stand firm against ‘the song of blades’ that plays outside, in the

streets. The visual emphasis on ‘James Brown’ suggests that his ‘screaming soul’ resonates throughout the ‘righteous righteous war’ of the stanza. The above interpretations are of course subjective. Yet the elements discussed should be recognised as poetic devices with which the poet varies the rhythmic texture of the written words. Whether syntactic or graphic, these elements allow the text to find diverse rhythms.

These key rhythmic features are specific to the written poem and are not reproducible in any other versions. On the other hand, rhythmic manifestations specific to the other versions are similarly unable to be represented here. Indeed, the print version does not provide an ‘audible reality’.<sup>335</sup> In other words, an analysis of rhythm on the printed page will inevitably lack the imprint of the poet’s carefully chosen manipulation of the spoken words, with or without music. In the absence of this audible reality, the built-in reggae rhythm ‘coming out of’ the words can be rather abstract and insignificant. In order to hear it, readers use their imagination, picking up echoes of the poet’s declamatory style through a transfer of audible reality. The point here is that to appropriately analyse rhythm, critics need to adapt the discussion to the parameters of the poem under scrutiny. I have already shown that the built-in reggae rhythm is best understood as the metric structure’s four beats with the characteristic emphasis on the offbeats. The one-drop rhythm provides a predefined, four-beat structure that the poet can follow for his alternation of main beat and offbeat in the poetic line. This structure can be imagined in a rather schematic manner; indeed, Attridge proposes a

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<sup>335</sup> Brian Dorsey, *Spirituality, Sensuality, Literality: Blues, Jazz and Rap as Music and Poetry* (Vienna: Braumüller, 2000), p. 259.

standardised version of the relationship between music and words. In the absence of music, syntactic and graphic cues can aid the visualisation of the four-beat structure behind the words. To have four beats per line, corresponding to the four beats of the musical bar, virtual beats must sometimes be added, as indicated below with brackets:

madness ... madness ... [= one bar of four beats]  
B [B] B [B]

> >

madness tight on the heads of the rebels;

B B B B  
> >

the bitterness erupts like a hot-blast.

B B B [B]  
> >

broke glass;

B [or echo of the virtual beat from the previous line]

rituals of blood on the burning,

B B B [B]  
> >

In the above representation, if ‘broke glass’ happens on a beat, there is no need for a virtual beat at the end of the final line. However, ‘broke glass’ can also be read as outside the metric structure, functioning as a type of echo responding to ‘hot-blast’. In this case, a virtual beat is needed at the end of final line. Given the poem’s layout, the latter interpretation seems the most appropriate. Throughout this first stanza, the punctuation and layout encourage this suggested placement of virtual beats. The period after ‘hot-blast’ and the comma after ‘burning’ suggest silent beats rather than run-on lines. The ellipsis after each ‘madness’ is more ambiguous. In the first line above, these can easily function as virtual beats, creating a clear four-beat structure. However, in this line’s repetition at the end of

the stanza, the addition of the word ‘war’ also adds a beat, which changes the number and position of virtual beats:

it's war amongst the rebels:  
B            B            B            [B]  
madness ... madness ... war  
B            B            B            [B]

In order to keep the four beat-structure, the suspension points in the final line must have a different function. They can be interpreted as suggesting a pause or a breathing break within the beat. Is that case, this line needs a virtual beat only after ‘war’. With this different organisation, the reading flow of the first sentence is altered, bringing a different rhythm into the poem.

### **Adding a musical dimension**

As the poem moves from the written text to a musical environment, its virtual beats happen at different moments. This is the result of a different organisation of words within the four-beat structure. The careful positioning of words produces a new reading flow, creating rhythmic diversity: the interplay of the poet’s voice and the steady beat of the music creates the poetic rhythm. As virtual beats appear in unexpected places, musical versions challenge the received idea of standardised performances in dub poetry. I use the placement of virtual beats to show how the poet’s voice emphasises the one-drop rhythm but also breaks the pattern to create unexpected rhythmic variety. With this in mind, I now turn to the early live version of ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ found in the documentary *Dead Beat and Blood*.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> *Dread Beat an' Blood*. dir. Rosso. Rebel Movies. 1979 [DVD].

The musical accompaniment is stripped down to a minimum: a bass, some percussion, a guitar. The performance starts with a call and response between the voice and the bass. Percussion on beats 2 and 4 and a skank guitar are used to give the musical texture some colour. It is only in the third line that the bass enters with the melodic line, a single-bar motif that is repeated throughout the entire poem as an ostinato. It is first played on its own before the rest of the musicians come back in. This solo introduction clearly establishes the four-beat structure of the bar:



The bass has a rest on the third beat, which produces space in the melodic line. The first beat has repeated notes, creating stillness in the melody. It is only on the second and the fourth beats that the melody moves. As mentioned above, the bass line is intimately linked to the one-drop rhythm. Here it plays with, rather than against, the pattern, emphasising the offbeats. This bass line is not saturated with ornamental notes, which would make the alternation between beat and offbeat less audible. Space and repeated notes are used to keep the rhythmic pulse clear so that the poet can 'ride the riddim', following the bass line to 'dub in' the riddim with his voice.

As we listen to and read along with the performance, the first stanza already clashes with the conventional organisation of beats suggested by the layout of the written text. 'Madness' corresponds not to the first beat of the musical bar but to the third. This use of a pickup bar, or anacrusis, is a common poetic and musical

technique to create anticipation before the first beat.<sup>337</sup> Because ‘madness’ appears only once in the first line here, as opposed to twice in all other versions, including the written one, there is a sense of anticipation right from the start. This choice also allows the beat to function as a simple structure organising the relationship between the poetic line and the music. Indeed, after this anacrusis, the first beat of the musical bar aligns with the first beat of the poetic line. The poet’s voice fills the silence of the third beat. It then stops to give space for the emphasised offbeat played by the bass at the end of the bar:

madness ...

madness tight on the head of the rebels; the

bitterness erupts like a hot-blast.

... the

The realisation of ‘broke glass’ in this context creates an unexpected organisation.

In its first appearance, it is followed by three virtual beats filled by the music:

broke glass ; [B2] [B3] [B4]

rituals of blood on the burning,

Like the anacrusis, this poetic device is used to align the first beat of the musical bar with the beginning of the poetic line. The unexpected verbal silence of the virtual beats has an expressive consequence, which is to put more attention on

<sup>337</sup> An anacrusis is one or more notes or words that precede the first beat. There are many examples in this poem, such as the ‘the’ before ‘bitterness’ and, in section four, the first syllable of ‘inside’ (anticipated by the first syllable in the last beat of the previous bar).

the preceding words. This organisation thus highlights the passage's semantic content. A few lines down, this spotlight effect recurs. In the repetition of 'broke glass', where one would expect a similar structure, the organisation of words and music differs. This time, 'broke glass' is not followed by three silent beats. Consequently, the beginning of the poetic line does not correspond to the first beat of the musical bar. Instead, 'cold blades' is placed on the second beat of the musical accompaniment, directly following 'broke glass':

Below is a representation of the expected organisation produced by an analysis of just the text:

cold blades as	sharp as the eyes of hate
B1	B2      B3      B4
and the stabblings.	
B1	[B2]      [B3]      [B4]

Here it is only after 'stabblings' that a virtual beat is included in the structure. This choice is dictated by the punctuation of the written text. Whereas 'stabblings' is followed by a full stop, 'the eyes of hate' is not. This explains the use of virtual beats after 'stabblings' but not after 'hate'.

The final stanza of this early version has other unexpected organisations of words and music. The word 'smash', for example, is followed by a virtual beat that for, the first time, is also empty of music. This creates a moment of complete silence with an effect of surprise. It is used to mirror the shock that the smashing

of glass provokes. ‘Broke glass’, on beat 1, is similarly followed by three virtual beats, but this time percussion fills the third beat:

so slow  
B1 [B2]  
so smooth  
B3 [B4]  
so tight an ripe an smash!  
B1 B2 B3 [B4]  
broke glass!  
B1 [B2B3B4]

The placement of the virtual beats in the above passage brings a rich variety of rhythm to the poet's voice. It alters the reading flow. Virtual beats on 2 and 4 in the first two poetic lines are used to emphasise the one-drop rhythm, which is interrupted by the succession of beats 1, 2 and 3 in the following line. Similarly, the three virtual beats after 'broke glass' also break the reading pattern and introduce a new rhythm into the performance. A few lines down, the same effect of surprise is produced after 'throat' and 'blood'. 'Throat' is followed by one virtual beat and one extra beat outside the four-beat structure. In order to get back to a standard and predictable organisation of words and music, with the beginning of the poetic line corresponding to the first beat of the accompaniment, 'o' is also voiced outside the bar's metric structure. With this second extra beat, 'stabbings' finds its expected place on beat 1. By disrupting the four-beat framework, these extra beats create a feeling of instability. The tension is resolved when 'stabbings' and the first musical beat occur together. This line ends with a virtual beat, having returned to an expected organisation of words and music after the destabilisation of the two extra beats:

find throat  
B3 [B4] [extra beat]  
o the stabbings an the bleeding an the blood.  
[extra beat] B1 B2 B3 [B4]

The play between tension and release found throughout the fifth night of bleeding is not random. It is purposefully introduced into the poem to reflect the content of the verse. Leroy was stabbed nearly to death the night before. On this final night, at the Telegraph, ‘vengeance walked through the doors’. Bottles are smashed across the room. ‘Stabbings’ and ‘bleeding’ continue throughout the night. It is the poem’s final night, but the ‘war amongst the rebels’ does not stop. In this passage, the tension produced by the unexpected placement of virtual beats reflects the overwhelming violence described throughout these verses.

The above discussion expands on Attridge’s concept of the virtual beat. Yet looking at the entire poem from a general point of view reveals a relatively conventional organisation of music and words around the notion of the beat. Indeed, in this version the poetic line tends to end with a virtual beat played by the musical accompaniment. This corresponds to Attridge’s standardised structure. This conventional organisation is not too surprising, as this version is an early attempt to move the written poem into a musical environment. The relationship between words and music is therefore relatively basic. Moreover, the fact that the backing music is stripped down suggests that the poet chose to produce a clear structure, used as a frame within which he could place his words.

When ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ reached the recording studio in 1978, it demonstrated a new organisation of music and words.<sup>338</sup> Different positions of

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<sup>338</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Roots. Dread Beat an’ Blood. Front Line. 1978 [CD].

virtual beats produced new expressive effects. This version is distinct in including strictly instrumental bars. The following discussion responds to these new parameters and shows how they introduce further intentional variation to the rhythmic texture of the poem.

The studio version's first lines start with a conventional organisation. There is the call and response between the voice and the bass already found in the earliest version. The ellipses of the written text function as virtual beats and are filled by the musical accompaniment. As opposed to the anacrusis of the earlier performance, this version starts with the beginning of the first poetic line aligned with the beginning of the first musical bar. As in the written version, 'madness' is repeated twice:

madness ... madness ...

madness tight on the head of the rebels the

bitterness e-----rupts like a hot-blast.

The placement of ‘broke glass’ relative to the music differs. It is followed by one virtual beat, rather than three as heard in the previous version. This shifts the alignment of words and music in unexpected directions. The poetic line begins on the third beat of the musical bar, after a virtual beat on the second beat. This scheme creates a new musical motif, with the second beat only played by the music. Repeated over four lines, this organisation produces a new reading flow that contrasts with that of the previous lines. It creates a clear pattern in which

repeated silence can emphasise the offbeat on 2. This is then interrupted by the absence of virtual beats in the following line:

It is only after ‘stabbings’ that three consecutive virtual beats occur. This choice is not too surprising, as it allows the chorus to return to the standardised organisation. Moreover, the verbal silence of these virtual beats is used to spotlight ‘stabbings’ in the listeners’ ears. As this silence is surprising, it draws attention to what is happening:

and the stabbings. [B2] [B3] [B4] it's

war a-----mongst the rebels:

madness ... madness ... war.

'Night number four' continues to explore the expressive possibilities of virtual beats. Here the poet includes two consecutive virtual beats in the middle of a poetic line:

hot.	hot heads.	ritual of blood in a blues dance.	
B1	[B2B3]	B4	B1
			B2
			B3
			broke glass;
			B1
			[B4]

Again, this choice reflects both content and form. On the level of form, ‘hot’ is followed by a full stop, which suggests a long pause. This punctuation mark is realised in performance with two virtual beats. Music fills them, making the suggested presence of the written text physically felt. Moreover, this line uses short, explosive words to mirror the violence of the scene in the two packed rooms that the verse describes. The rebels smash glasses. Blades are ready to stab. Violence is scattered across the room. Virtual beats are used to convey this collapsing, chaotic atmosphere. They break the continuity of the poetic line into small units, mirroring the breaking of glass into pieces. Moreover, the use of music alone slows down the pace of listening, creating silence and time in which the words can be digested. In this passage, the poetic structure amplifies and supports the content of the verse, revealing a deliberate intention to aurally convey the scene’s explosive violence. Rather than reflecting the semantic meaning of the words, the virtual beats move the audience to interpret this violence with their ears.

As said above, this studio version brings strictly musical bars into the performance, in stanzas 3, 4 and 6. They do not function as structural elements on which the poet can organise his lines. Yet despite being independent of the verse, they nonetheless change the rhythm of the poetics, as they alter the flow of the poet’s declamatory style.

In stanza 3, a musical bar is added just after the poem’s only a cappella line. The sequence of a vocal line followed by a musical bar contrasts with the rest of

the poem, an environment where music and words constantly coexist, introducing an element of surprise. Successive encounters with unfamiliar performative styles like these destabilise the listener. This organisation of an a cappella line followed by a musical bar of course reflects the content of the verse. When the words say ‘Suddenly the music cut’, the performance performs that cut. The music stops, leaving three beats of silence. This setting dramatises the ‘steel blade drinking blood’, the rebels stabbing ‘in darkness’, that this passage depicts.

steel blade drinking blood in darkness. (a cappella)

B1      B2      B3      B4  
[extra musical bar]

The stanza describing ‘night number three’ similarly uses extra musical bars, inserted after ‘freezing cold’ and ‘righteous righteous war’. This section has a different quality of sound, starting from line 4. There the music becomes less rhythmic. The skank, the emphasised offbeat, in both the guitar and the keyboard stops, to make some room for dub effects. The musical texture is filled with echoes, reverb and random sounds like sirens and horns. The metrical regularity of the beat, its steady pulse, thus cedes the ground to a much different sonic environment. Just as in a dub soundscape, ‘timbre, spatiality, and texture [become] primary musical values.’<sup>339</sup> The echoes and the reverb of this midsection

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<sup>339</sup> Veal, p. 61.

deconstruct the four-beat structure of the musical accompaniment. The musical bar after ‘freezing cold’ introduces this new sound quality. It brings into the performance a space that is dedicated to pure music, preparing the transition to the new soundscape. This sonic environment, a dub environment, persists until the offbeat skank of the rhythm instruments returns in the stanza’s final line. Heard on ‘blood’, the skank reintroduces the four-beat structure of the musical bar and re-establishes the syncopated feeling that very often defines reggae. The additional bar at the end of this stanza imitates the structure of the chorus. The three words in the final line, ‘righteous righteous war’, echo the three words in the final line of the chorus, ‘madness madness war’. Yet in order to keep the structure of the chorus—in other words, two poetic lines—an extra line is needed at the end of the stanza. Here the entire bar after ‘righteous righteous war’ is used to complete the structure, recognised as the one heard up to now in the chorus. With this extra musical bar, the stanza can end in a familiar way and hence fit the poem’s overall organisation.

Finally, in the poem’s last stanza, two extra musical bars are added after ‘throat’. As in a previous example, they are used to bring reverb, echoes and other dub effects into the sonic texture, creating a space where dub music can enter the performance. They are also used to dramatise the content of the lyrics. In this passage, filled with omnipresent violence, the extra musical bars extend the space of expression. As the creation of space is also the creation of time, the extra bars slow down the reception of this violence. They are a strategic device to put more attention on the passage. Extra musical bars extend the listener’s receptive time in this moment of extreme violence. In so doing, they accentuate the semantic

content of the lyrics:

the victim feels fear  
B1            B2            [B3]  
finds hands  
B4            [B1]  
holds knife  
B2            [B3]  
finds throat;  
B4            [B1B2B3B4]    [B1B2B3]  
o the stabbings and the bleeding and the blood.  
B4    B1            B2            B3            [B4]

The repetition of virtual beats on 1 and 2 here again creates a particular reading flow. Yet this pattern reverses the one discussed above, as the voice plays against the one-drop rhythm, filling beats 2 and 4 with words rather than emphasising the offbeat with silence. After almost two full music-only bars, ‘o’ arrives on the fourth beat of the second added measure. This anacrusis creates an effect of suspension that resolves as ‘stabbings’ occurs on the first musical beat. Whereas the virtual beats of the previous lines are placed unexpectedly, this last line follows a standard organisation. This return to convention concludes the narration of this ‘war amongst the rebels’ in an expected way. Although it is the end of the poem, stabbings, bleeding and blood continue to be the reality. The chorus—‘it’s war amongst the rebels: / madness ... madness ... war’—is repeated one more time to suggest the continuation of this violence.

It is only after this final stanza ends that the poem extends into pure musical form. It is again in the absence of words that dub music enters the poem. As we saw above, the regular metre of the four-beat structure heard in the reggae accompaniment is deconstructed to leave space for ‘timbre, spatiality and texture’. Dub effects such as delays and echoes are used to decentre the rhythm. In the absence of words, it is less important to organise the music around the beat.

This shift of sonic texture from reggae to dub mirrors the artistic practice in the dub music tradition. Indeed, the dub extension of ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ corresponds to the instrumental version that follows the original reggae tune without any cut. In the recording, the instrumental section after the spoken word part can similarly be interpreted as the extended version of the original song: the poem, functioning as the original reggae tune, is followed by its dub version. In the poem’s early years, the instrumental version was presented on the B-side of the original heard on the A-side of a 45 rpm. With advances in recording technology, particularly the development of acetate, which allowed for a longer recording space, the dub version could follow the original without any cut. The instrumental extension is an integral part of this poem, connected to it through the mix. Nonetheless, they are two distinctive spaces. The dub version is the creative arena of the studio engineer, where sounds from the poem are recycled, revised and remixed, deconstructing and reconstructing the original. The original version, on the other hand, is the poet’s creative space. There he places his words within the four-beat structure provided by reggae music’s metre. LKJ’s rejection of the term ‘dub poetry’ reflects and illustrates the tension between reggae and dub in the creation of dub poetry: The relationship between words and music and the various organisations around the beat are connected to reggae rather than to dub. Yet it is also true that dub as a technique and a concept played an important role in the emergence of this poetic tradition. Chapter 1 discussed this and reconsidered the relationship between the words ‘dub’ and ‘poetry’ in the neologism ‘dub poetry’. Therefore, opting for the term ‘reggae poem’ runs the risk of overlooking and even erasing the artistic influence, inspiration and lineage from the DJs. Moreover, a

reggae tune would have been too heavy to support the literary practice of dub poetry. Dub versions, by contrast, are stripped down to the song's essential structure, leaving space for the words of the DJ, and later the dub poet, to be recited and heard. Because of the importance of the words, a dub poem works better on a dub version—where the words can breathe—than on a reggae track. Yet, the relationship between the voice and the rhythm of the drum and bass in the metric structure of reggae music, rather than dub music, remains a fundamental site of analysis. Studies of dub poetry have neglected the different roles in the sonic space of reggae and dub. But not paying attention to the seamless transition from the spoken to the instrumental version inevitably leads to reductive interpretations that see dub as 'the ideal backdrop for anti-establishment spoken word denunciation'.<sup>340</sup> An analysis of the performed poem must make a clear distinction between the role and place of reggae on the one hand and of dub on the other.

Up to now, I have interrogated the organisation of poetic words within the metric structure provided by music at the semibreve level: I looked at the entire bar to discuss the organisation of beat and offbeat in the relationship between music and words. The following paragraphs continue this analysis at the minim and crochet levels.

### **From syllables to beats**

I have already explained that 'offbeat' can refer to the second half of a subdivided

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<sup>340</sup> Mike Alleyne, *The Encyclopedia of Reggae: The Golden Age of Roots Reggae* (New York: Sterling, 2012), p. 133.

beat. In a 4/4 time signature, the offbeat corresponds to the second quaver of a single beat. These different levels of analysis, the bar versus the beat and the poetic line versus the word, are important to keep in mind, as they offer different interpretations of rhythmic diversity. In a context where poetry and music are united, it is often the case that ‘the strong beat of the accompaniment coincides with the stressed beat of the verse’.<sup>341</sup> By the same token, the offbeat of the musical accompaniment coincides with the offbeat, or unstressed beat, of the verse. Although Attridge insists that stressed syllables are not always on the main beats, he nonetheless observes that they often correspond and have a similar function.<sup>342</sup> There are exceptions, such as when a stressed syllable acts as an offbeat. This phenomenon is called demotion.<sup>343</sup> In contrast, when an unstressed syllable acts as a strong beat, this is known as a promotion.<sup>344</sup> In order to visualise the relationship between words and music based on beats and offbeats, I use Attridge’s scanning method. Offbeats in the poetic line are marked with ‘o’ and strong beats with ‘B’, while the / sign indicates a stressed syllable and ‘x’ an unstressed syllable. This notation system is a useful tool for seeing the coexistence of stressed and unstressed syllables in the poet’s voice and the use of beats and offbeats in the musical accompaniment. Because the aim of the analysis is to highlight how deliberate choices in the poet’s pronunciation create rhythmic diversity, red is used to indicate the poetic pronunciation and black the expected

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<sup>341</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 90.

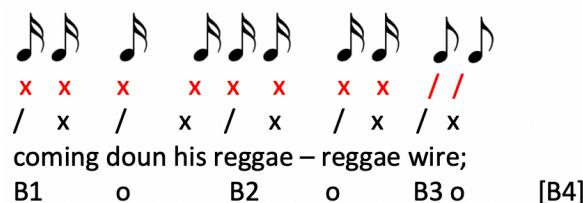
<sup>342</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 76.

<sup>343</sup> ‘Under certain very specific conditions a stressed syllable can function as an offbeat’ (Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 70).

<sup>344</sup> ‘Under certain specific conditions an unstressed syllable functions not as an offbeat, which is what is normally expected, but as a beat’ (Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 74).

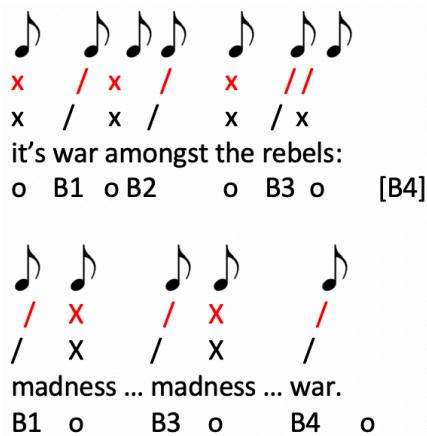
pronunciation of everyday speech, revealing unexpected discrepancies but also expected delivery. As will be demonstrated, the articulation of stressed and unstressed syllables is not the result of a standardised alternation dictated by the beats and offbeats of reggae rhythm. Instead, it is used to create rhythmic diversity by following or contrasting with what is happening in the music.

From the very first lines of the studio version, the listener is surprised by unexpected pronunciation. In the ‘night number one’ stanza, the poet blurs the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables throughout the entire third and fourth lines. ‘Fire’ and ‘wire’, monosyllabic words, are given two stresses each, a specific pronunciation that will be further discussed as a rhythmic hallmark of the poem:



This declamatory style obviously contrasts sharply with the rest of the stanza. The unexpected pronunciation changes the reading flow and, in so doing, brings a certain rhythm into the performance. This altered pronunciation is used to illustrate the content of the line. Indeed, it reflects the percussion of the reggae coming down the wire of Sofrano B’s sound system. The rhythm of this pronunciation uses what Brathwaite calls ‘the sound-structure of Rastafarian

drums'.<sup>345</sup> In the poet's articulation, the listener hears the rhythmic drums 'shaking doun your spinal column'. This shift and flattening of a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in the voice is accompanied by a similar change in the musical texture. After the first few lines of this stanza, reggae's emphasised offbeat is dropped. The hi-hat plays each quaver, equally subdividing the beat. The main and the secondary beats are given similar stress. Like the poet's pronunciation, this flattens the rhythm by blurring the distinction between main and secondary beats within the beat itself. The emphasised offbeat returns in the stanza's last three lines. Not too surprisingly, this is also the moment when the poet returns to an expected declamatory style, alternating stressed and unstressed syllables:

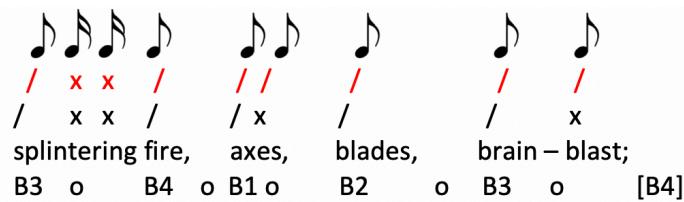


Stanza 5 is another place where the semantic content and the rhythmic flow are mutually influential. In this fourth night of black rebellion, violence is at its peak. This is the time when Leroy 'bleeds near death'. I have already discussed how the layout and the syntax respond to the violence depicted in this scene. Dots and commas, as well as monosyllabic, percussive words, are used to break the rhythm

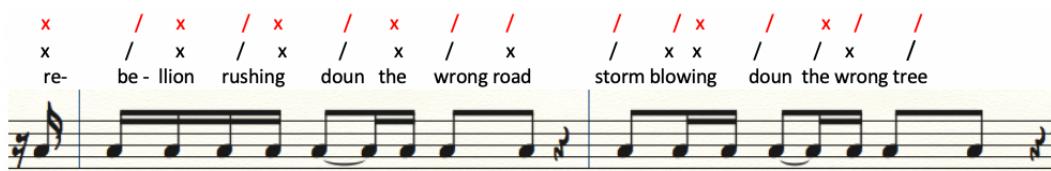
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<sup>345</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 33.

of the reading in order to suggest chaos and fights. The poet similarly deforms his pronunciation to reflect this overwhelming violence. With one word per beat, the pronunciation breaks the rhythmic fluidity of the previous line. ‘Fire’, ‘axes’, ‘blades’—each takes the length of an entire beat, despite having only one syllable. Following Attridge’s proposed pattern, these monosyllabic words should correspond to only half a beat, i.e. a quaver. This declamatory style slows down the pace of the reading, again bringing a different rhythm to the performance and allowing the listener to fully digest the scene’s description:

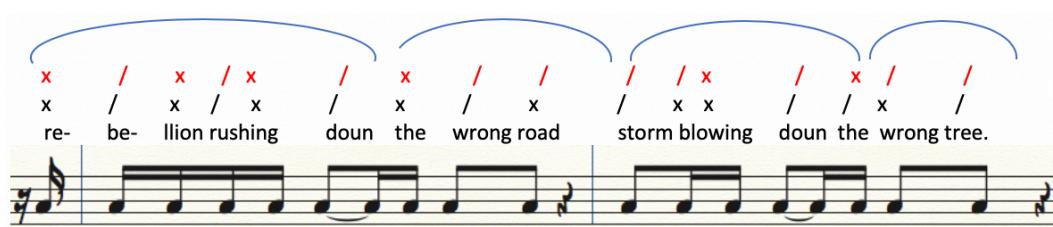


The two following lines form a sharp contrast. Rather than slowing down the reading pace, the poet squeezes multisyllabic words within single beats. The new temporality created by this organisation of syllables expresses the fury and the rush resulting from another night of violence. This compressed declamatory style opposes that of ‘fire, axes, blades’:



The transcription above shows the number of syllables within a single beat. It also highlights the parallel musical structure in the second half of both bars. This organisation of syllables within the beat is not random. It is used to create a specific phrasing in the poetic line. Attridge explains that ‘when we refer to the “rhythm” of a particular poem, we are often referring – whether we know it or not

– to its phrasing, and hence it is perfectly appropriate to use the word *rhythm* to include phrasing.<sup>346</sup> The term ‘phrasal movement’, in other words, describes the internal rhythm created by the organisation of syllables into units, or phrases. Attridge distinguishes between rhythmic movement on the one hand and phrasal movement on the other. In rhythmic movement, rhythm is ‘produced by the patterning of stressed and unstressed syllables in relation to the units of verse’. In phrasal movement, rhythm is ‘produced by syntax and meaning’.<sup>347</sup> Although he insists on this distinction, for the purposes of this analysis, I want to emphasise a reciprocity between syntax and patterns of stresses that interconnect to create poetic rhythm. Indeed, in the above example, the rhythmic movement of the poet’s voice corresponds to the syntactic movement of the poetic line. As they combine, they create a distinctive rhythmic phrase. Listening to an a cappella version or simply reading this passage aloud reveals this mutual organisation. Phrasal movements in the poetic line, indicated below by curves, correspond to the rhythmic movement of the poet’s voice. This match is made possible by adjusting the organisation of syllables to the beats of the musical bar. As the poet places his syllables within the beat, he extends the duration of some beyond their usual length of half a beat:



Above, the monosyllabic word ‘doun’ is twice stretched beyond the length of half

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<sup>346</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 182.

<sup>347</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 183.

a beat. The ‘the’ preceding both ‘wrong road’ and ‘wrong tree’ are consequently shortened to be recited on half the length of the divided beat. This organisation allows for a pause after ‘doun’, in order to contrast with the rushed feeling of the preceding squeezed syllables. When Leroy ‘bleeds near death’, the rhythm changes again, returning to a slower pace. Here the distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables is once again blurred. ‘LEROY’, written in capital letters, is the only word given two stresses. The rest of the line is recited with the same declamatory style as that of ‘night number one’:

x	/	/	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
x	/	x	/	x	/	x	x	/	x
and LEROY bleeds near death on the fourth night,									
o	B1	o	B2	o	B3	o	B4	o	[B1B2]
x x / /									
x x / x									
in a blues dance,									
o	B3	o	B4						
x x / x / x x /									
x x / x / x /									
on a black rebellious night.									
o	B1	o	B2	o	B3	o	[B4]		

Here it is not Rastafarian drums that are suggested. Instead, this staccato articulation dramatises the scene. The mechanical pronunciation inevitably draws the listener’s attention to this passage. To accompany this monorhythmic pronunciation, the rhythm guitar plays chords on the offbeats only sporadically throughout the passage. When Leroy bleeds, however, the rhythm guitar completely stops playing chords on the offbeats. It is a grave time, and the music is used to support every syllable announcing Leroy’s bleeding. In this alteration of pronunciation to highlight the poetic line’s semantic content, the organisation of the syllables in the word ‘rebellious’ further explores the expressive possibilities of this declamatory style’s rhythm. Instead of reciting the word with three

syllables, with a stress on the second, the poet adds an extra syllable. As this ‘night number four’ is a time of extreme violence, the word ‘rebellious’ needs more weight, more attention. It needs to be extended vocally. The contrast between the percussive, short word ‘black’ and the overextended articulation of ‘rebellious’ calls the listener’s attention to the assemblage of these two words. This is not just a rebellion. It is a ‘black rebellious night’.

Attridge explains that within the unit of a musical bar, the stressed beats will be ‘separated by other syllables that may vary in number and may include other stressed syllables’.<sup>348</sup> The poet can follow this expected organisation, which aligns beat and stressed syllable and offbeat and unstressed syllable, or challenge it to create rhythmic diversity. In the first stanza, for instance, the poet uses a standard organisation. ‘Madness’ has two syllables. It is recited in the first beat of the musical bar, the first syllable stressed and coinciding with the first part of the beat, the main beat, and the second syllable unstressed and coming on the second part of the beat, the offbeat. Such regular organisation is found throughout the stanza. The general tendency is for stressed syllables to arrive on the strong beats and unstressed syllables on the offbeats:

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<sup>348</sup> Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*, p. 90.

  
 / x      / x  
 / x      / x  
 madness ... madness ...  
 B1 o    B2 B3 o    B4

/ x / x x / x x / x x / x  
 / x / x x / x x / x x / x  
 madness tight on the heads of the rebels;  
 B1 o    B2 o    B3 o    B4o

x / x x x / x x / /  
 x / x x x / x x / x  
 the bitterness erupts like a hot-blast.  
 B1 o    B2 o    B3 o

/ /  
 / x  
 broke glass;  
 B1 o

In words where the stress is on the second syllable, the poet adapts the organisation so that the first, unstressed syllable comes on the offbeat of the previous beat. This is seen in the word ‘erupts’, for instance. The stressed syllable ‘-rupts’ arrives on a main beat, even though this means stretching the word over two beats. This organisation allows the typical correlation between beats and stressed syllables to continue. Yet when this overall regularity is examined more attentively, some unexpected behaviours start to emerge. In line 9 of the first stanza, the poet uses words whose monosyllables contrast sharply with the lengths of preceding words: ‘cold’, ‘blades’, ‘sharp’, ‘eyes’ are opposed to ‘rituals’, ‘burning’, ‘fighting’, ‘bleeding’. This line starts on the offbeat of the previous musical bar’s fourth beat, changing ‘cold’ into an unexpectedly *unstressed* syllable—all the more unexpected as it clashes with the emphasised offbeat of the one-drop rhythm. ‘Blades’ gets a stress and arrives on the first beat of the next

musical bar. As the notation below shows, this pattern changes the conventional succession of stressed and unstressed syllables expected in a non-poetic context:

The image shows five lines of lyrics with stress patterns indicated by slashes (/) and 'x' marks. The lyrics are:

- cold
- blades as
- sharp as the
- eyes of
- hate

Below each line, the stress pattern is written as a sequence of 'B' (stressed) and 'o' (unstressed). A blue vertical line labeled '3' is positioned between the second and third lines. The musical notation consists of a staff with notes corresponding to the syllables, with a tempo marking of '♩ = 120' at the top.

A non-poetic pronunciation would have clashed with the musical track. In order to respond to the music, the poet chooses not to stress 'cold'. Yet he also brings an expected succession of syllables into the poetic texture, producing a different rhythm. In following the music, the performance creates an unexpected rhythm that enhances the poem's rhythmic texture. In this stanza, the endings of the poetic lines show a similar tension between expected and unexpected realisation. The poetic pronunciation of 'burning', 'fighting' and 'bleeding' twists the pronunciation found in a non-poetic context. Whereas these words normally have a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one, they are overpronounced in the performance of the poem. Indeed, both of their syllables are stressed, instead of just one. The same is true for 'rebels', although its expected stress is on the last syllable:

/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
/	x	/	x	/	x	x	/
B	o	B	o	B	o	B	o

bur - ning ; fight - ing ; blee - ding; re – bels

Another example of contradictory pronunciation happens with 'broke glass'. Whereas it is expected that the first word will be stressed and the second unstressed, the poet chooses to emphasise both words, giving each of them stress. Similarly overpronounced syllables at the end of a line are present throughout the

poem. In their consistency, they create a distinctive pattern that is part of this particular poem's declamatory style. They are key elements that bring a specific rhythm into the poem. They are recognised hallmarks.

In 'night number one', the tension between poetic and non-poetic pronunciation is also present in words such as 'BRIXTON' and 'SOFRANO'. Here we can argue that the capital letters suggest a different pronunciation. 'Brixton' has two syllables: one stressed, followed by one unstressed. In the performance, however, the word is stressed on both syllables. 'Sofrano' is realised slightly differently. It is a word of three syllables, with a stress on the second syllable. In the performance, both the second and the third syllables receive a stress. The first, unstressed syllable happens on the offbeat of the previous beat. This extension of the word over two beats matches syllabic stress to musical beat:

/        x    x    /    x    x    /    /  
/        /    x    /    x    x    /    x  
night number one was in BRIXTON:  
B1    o        B2    o        B3    o        [B4]

x    / / / / /    /  
x    / x x / /    x  
SOFRANO B sound system  
o B1 o B2 o B3 o [B4]

The above are illustrations of promotion. In the examples here, the second syllable, expected to be unstressed, is stressed in the poem's performance. Placed within a musical environment, this promotion clashes not only with the non-poetic pronunciation of the word but also with the pattern of the backing music. Indeed, the double stresses given to these words do not mirror the alternation of main beat and offbeat within the unit of a single beat. The purposeful stressing of a usually unstressed syllable happens on an offbeat. Yet because reggae emphasises

the offbeat, the second stressed syllable of the above words in fact further accentuates the offbeat. Promotion is similarly used with monosyllabic words such as ‘fire’ and ‘wire’. In these cases, the poet divides the word into two syllables so that it can be recited over a full beat of the musical bar. In musical terms, these words become two quavers used to fill the length of the beat, the crochet. In the poem, these two quavers receive two consecutive stresses. As they happen at the end of the line, they are used to create and mirror the distinctive rhythmic pattern that runs throughout the performance of this studio version.

This overpronunciation is the result of an artistic intention to bring the one-drop reggae rhythm of the musical accompaniment into the voice. In other words, this artificial articulation is influenced by the reggae offbeat. Words at the end of the poetic lines are overstressed to give the reading flow the characteristic pattern of the emphasised reggae offbeat on beat 4. Other versions of the poem illustrate how different pronunciations emphasise or minimise this rhythmic characteristic.<sup>349</sup> The a cappella performance of this poem at Queen Elizabeth Hall in Southbank, London, in 1984 includes an over-articulation of words such as ‘fire’, ‘wire’ and ‘rebel’.<sup>350</sup> It has the same rhythmic pattern as the studio version. Much later, LKJ’s a cappella reading at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Foundation’s Lopud Seminar in 2017 used a declamatory style in which this

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<sup>349</sup> In this performance of Garland Jeffreys’s poem ‘Miami Beach’, LKJ’s pronunciation is not influenced by a musical rhythm, despite the musical accompaniment, see *Garland Jeffreys’s Miami Beach 1981 (Official Music Video)*. 1980. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gi9gxURyuYA>> [16 May 2018].

<sup>350</sup> *Linton Kwesi Johnson in Concert with the Dub Band - Live at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank, London*. November 1984. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2xNkEDAwbA>> [16 November 2017]. This is true of many other a cappella performances of this poem.

distinctive pronunciation is less audible.<sup>351</sup> ‘Fire’, ‘wire’, and ‘rebels’ are recited in an expected way: the monosyllabic words have only one syllable, and the first syllable of ‘rebels’ is unstressed, followed by a stressed one. LKJ’s career as a reggae artist was at its peak in 1984, and his poetry was strongly associated with the reggae scene. He deliberately emphasised this association with a pronunciation of words that implicitly conveyed the presence of a band, a form of compensation for the actual lack of backing music. With words such as ‘fire’, ‘wire’ and ‘rebel’, the poet matches the rhythmic pattern of this absent accompaniment. Although performed outside a musical context, this version continues to refer to such an environment. By contrast, when it moves to a location such as an art gallery, the a cappella version of the poem has a pronunciation that is less preoccupied with making the reggae band ‘come out of’ the words. The different intentions of these different versions influence the poet’s declamatory style.

Finally, in its rhythmic shifts, the poem displays interesting parallels to the music’s ambiguity between binary and ternary divisions. In the discussion of the printed poem, I mentioned that in ‘night number three’, word choice, syntax and layout created a ternary rhythmic division in the reading flow. In the performance of the studio recording, the poet makes this shift clearly audible, grouping his words as the analysis of the written poem suggests. With the use of a strong beat, or stress, on particular words, he emphasises the ternary division of the lines:

> > >  
[the song] [of blades] [was sounded,]  
> > >  
[the bile] [of oppression] [was vomited,]  
> > >

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<sup>351</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson’s ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ - *Ephemeropterae*, Lopud. 2017. Available at <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGR6d\\_hsaKk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGR6d_hsaKk)> [20 December 2017].

[and two] [policemen] [wounded.]

Against the musical accompaniment's regular 4/4 time signature, the poet recites the final lines of this fourth stanza within a metrical frame that could be identified as 12/8. There is thus a metric tension between the poetic line and the music. While the music continues to play in a metric structure where each beat corresponds to a crochet, or two quavers, the poet's pronunciation introduces a ternary metric structure in which the beat is composed of a dotted crochet, or three quavers. In 4/4 time, 'song', 'blades' and 'bile', all monosyllabic words that would normally fill the length of half a beat, would be recited on the first quaver of the beat and be followed by the next word—'of' or 'was'—in the other half of the same beat. In this performance, this is not the case: 'song', 'blades' and 'bile' are longer than the following words, which suggests that they each correspond to a slurred quaver. The three syllables of 'vomited' and 'policemen' are equally distributed within the beat, again showing this beat's subdivision beat into three, rather than two, quavers:

The musical notation is presented in two staves. The top staff begins with a 12/8 time signature. It contains the lyrics: song, of, blades, was, sounded, the, bile, of, oppression, was, vo ---- mi ---- ted, and. The bottom staff begins with a 12/8 time signature. It contains the lyrics: two, po ----- lice, man, woun --- ded. The music consists of eighth-note patterns typical of a 12/8 time signature.

The first and last of these poetic lines end with a rhythmic pattern already heard: both syllables of 'sounded' and 'wounded' are stressed. The juxtaposition of the ternary beat organisation to the accompaniment's binary framework creates tension between the voice and the music. The poem's final section has a similar

tension. ‘So tight an ripe an smash!’ and ‘The stabbings an the bleeding an the blood’ are recited with a ternary rhythm, which, again, stresses on particular words are used to emphasise:

> > >  
[So tight] [an ripe] [an smash!]  
[...]  
> > >  
[The stabbings] [an the bleeding] [an the blood]

Again, this organisation of words clashes with the backing music’s four-beat structure. The lines ‘a bottle finds a head / an the shell of the fire-hurt cracks’ show the same shift of rhythm from binary to ternary division. The enunciation of the monosyllabic words ‘head’ and ‘shell’ extends beyond half the length of a binary beat:<sup>352</sup>



This example is a final illustration of how the poet carefully manipulates the organisation of his words with the parameters of the music to find a variety of rhythmic possibilities in the poem. It also shows how the rhythmic characteristics of reggae music are used as sources of inspiration for the rhythm of the poetics. Too often seen as predictable and standardised, with an artificial adaptation of words to fit ‘the grooves of the music’, dub poetry in fact uses a diversity of rhythms, which this close reading has proposed innovative frameworks to appreciate.

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<sup>352</sup> To be rigorously precise, the transcription would have used a composite system of notation that could show the move from ternary to binary subdivision in a single bar. ‘Fire-hurt cracks’ is in fact recited within the binary system found throughout the poem.

Interrogating LKJ's poem 'Five Nights of Bleeding', this chapter has analysed shifts of rhythm within but also across versions. While situating its argument within the tradition of dub poetry, this chapter has offered original perspectives on the notion of rhythm useful to the broader academic field by investigating the union of poetry and music. The approaches proposed in this close reading can easily be applied to other poetic styles where music and words cohabit.

## Chapter 5: A search for a poetics of musicality

Discussions of dub poetry often blur the distinction between poetry and song. For instance, it has been characterised as a ‘songlike and strongly rhymed poetry [that] sometimes approaches reggae’s socially prophetic lyrics’.<sup>353</sup> In this imbricated relationship, dub poetry ‘draws on song but makes something new’.<sup>354</sup> The connection comes from the fact that some versions of dub poems are performed with music. Dub poetry appears in both books and on records, which makes the line between poetry and lyric difficult to draw. Yet a dub poem, or a ‘reggae poem’, as LKJ likes to call it, and a reggae song are not the same. Aware of the crossover between poetry and music, LKJ explains:

Eventually I found that I was getting closer to the music, and trying to write within the strict parameters of reggae form which is very limiting. You’re not conscious of it at the time, but you get drawn closer and closer and closer to the music until in the end what you’re doing is basically making reggae songs or composing reggae music. [...] The kind of poetry I was writing, that I am known for, at least, would be written in a way that a poetic idea would come to me as a musical one. The two would be the same thing – a musical idea or a poetic idea. I can’t find any better way of putting it.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 200.

<sup>354</sup> Ramazani, p. 208.

<sup>355</sup> Mervyn Morris, ‘Interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson by Mervyn Morris (extract)’, in *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain*, ed. Edward Archibald Markham (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1989), pp. 250-261 (p. 260).

Likewise, Onuora acknowledges a strong connection between music and poetry in his own work: ‘People like Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Burning Spear were the people who influenced me as a writer’.<sup>356</sup> Despite this unquestionable overlap, the role and place of music in the poetics of dub remain underanalysed. Moreover, I argue that the musical context on the one hand and the literary context on the other must be analysed with different interpretive tools. Studies of dub poetry take the explicit presence of a band for granted, not questioning its role and place at the level of poetics. But music behaves differently in a song or with a poem. Obviously, this indistinct ground between poetry and song produced by a musical presence is not limited to the genre of dub poetry.<sup>357</sup> Because the crossover between them rests on a series of connotations and expectations from readers, critics and the artists themselves, the boundary between poetry and song is subjective and permeable, depending on the perspective. A distinction or conversely an assimilation between poetry and song is based on shifting categories that can be accordingly embraced, challenged, blurred or rejected. My aim here is not to resolve this ongoing debate: I do not intend to propose new definitions that would simply redefine the edges of these categories with potentially problematic classifications. Instead, I offer a discussion of music that responds to the creative space of a poet rather than that of a singer. Echoing Glyn Maxwell’s discussion in his book *On Poetry*, I argue that poetry’s musical aspect

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<sup>356</sup> Eric Doumerc, ‘An Interview with Oku Onuora’, *Miranda*, 14 (2017), pp. 1-8 (p. 2) <<http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/10061>> [20 February 2018].

<sup>357</sup> The relationship between poetry and jazz, for instance, is well studied. Graham Lock and David Murray ed., *Thriving on a Riff: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Literature and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) is one notable book amongst many others.

needs to be approached from the angle of an artistic context concerned with poetics. The musical aspect of a song, however, belongs to an artistic context concerned with music. Maxwell uses the presence of the page to distinguish the poet from the singer. For the poet, he argues, the whiteness of a blank sheet of paper or a screen and the blackness of ink or pixels are the working tools, the main ingredients of poetry. ‘Poets work with two materials, one’s black and one’s white’. In songs, however, ‘lyrics are not composed to take the form of black signs upon that whiteness, therefore the blackness itself is alien. [...] The other half of everything for the songwriters is music. For the poets it’s silence, the space, the whiteness’.<sup>358</sup>

Although this distinction is an oversimplification of an unresolved debate and can be challenged from various angles, it has useful principles that show how poets and singers ‘are at different work’.<sup>359</sup> Despite its rather straightforward delineation based on working space and working materials, Maxwell’s argument does not dismiss the musical dimension of and in poetry. He explains that a successful poem can rely on a synesthesia in which the reader’s encounter of words activates the ‘solar, lunar, musical, visual’.<sup>360</sup> This comment is rather vague and merits further elaboration. For the purpose of this discussion, Maxwell’s point of view offers the fundamental opportunity to think of poetry and music within their respective spaces of creation. This approach situates the musical dimension of a poem in the poem itself rather than in the musical accompaniment. It is

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<sup>358</sup> Glyn Maxwell, *On poetry* (London: Oberon Books, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>359</sup> Maxwell, p. 13.

<sup>360</sup> Maxwell, p. 34. See the rest of the page for a more detailed elaboration of these categories.

exactly from this ‘inside’ poetic space that the close reading of the next chapter analyses the role and place of music in dub poetry. Discussions of music in poetry have been limited by an exclusive focus on music’s explicit presence, too often reducing it to merely an accompaniment and even taking it for granted. Although the audible presence of music is an undeniable aspect of dub poetry, staying on this level of recognition is problematic, as it shadows the relationship between poetry and music on a poetic level. In today’s highly mediatised world, sonic versions of a dub poem, with or without music, can circulate widely on platforms such as the Internet, the radio, TV and records. In the 1970s and early 1980s, however, encounters with this dimension of the poetry happened under different circumstances. It is very unlikely that the musical versions of poems circulated. Moreover, confining the analysis of music to bands and their output would disregard the chronological development of dub poems, which were first written and published before being performed with a band and released on record. Moreover, the move from printed text to musical record was also motivated by economic reasons. To limit discussion of the music to the sound of the reggae band would dismiss the reality of these different parameters.

Therefore, in order to acknowledge and consider these parameters, I situate my analysis of music in dub poetry, its role and place, at the level of poetic expression. This chapter brings serious attention to what the music does to and in the poetry. It looks at the relationship between music and writing. Music thus shapes certain characteristics of the poet’s language. Through a close reading of different versions of LKJ’s poem ‘Street 66’, one printed and two recorded, I argue that music inspires the poet to stylistic innovation in both written and performed

versions. I use a comparative reading of these different versions to show how variations but also consistencies and convergences are the result of a continuous concern for the poetic possibilities that music provides across time and across versions.

### **Reggae and low frequencies**

Reggae has played an inspiring role across a variety of art forms. Kwame Dawes's book *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing* explores its influence under the coined term 'reggae aesthetic'. To my knowledge, this is the only monograph that investigates this topic. In his introduction to the collection of reggae poetry *Wheel and Come Again*, he explains that

a reggae aesthetic [is] an aesthetic that one can discern in the dub poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson and in the sonnets of Geoffrey Philp. Sometimes these poems do not look anything like a reggae song, but at their core and in their attitudes they represent a dialogue with reggae.<sup>361</sup>

*Natural Mysticism* explains how this creative power emerged from the omnipresence of reggae in the social context of diasporic Jamaican communities.

It functions on both an individual and a collective level:

On the one hand, the aesthetic may serve as a self-consciously applied frame, guiding and shaping the work being produced, where the artist is looking to reggae for a model of creative expression. On the other hand, reggae music

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<sup>361</sup> Kwame Dawes, 'Introduction', in *Wheel and Come Again: an Anthology of Reggae Poetry*, ed. Kwame Dawes (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1998), pp. 15-26 (p. 22).

epitomizes an aesthetic development within an artistic community as a whole or within a society at large.<sup>362</sup>

Recycling the Rastafarian prophetic voice from the 1930s in the postcolonial context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, reggae was an important source of inspiration for an entire generation of Jamaican youths living in the UK and looking for means of self-expression. Sound systems functioned as important spaces for the establishment of counter-narratives, where an alternative consciousness could be spread. As William ‘Lez’ Henry explains:

In fact, it was during these moments of sharing ‘self-understanding’ expressed by deejays telling life-stories in the Reggae dancehall, that black youth recognised themselves within the grand narratives of the African diaspora. The message was one of commonality with regard to the positioning of the black ‘other’ in a white-dominated racialised arena.<sup>363</sup>

Reggae provided an alternative ideological and spiritual frame of reference, presented a particular lexicon and offered a series of symbols and images that responded to the needs of a young generation living with the confidence of a newly independent Jamaica but also facing the racial hostility that swept England during those years. In this hostile environment, reggae gave this generation, whose identity was constantly denied, a space for expression independent of the oppressive British society. As LKJ explains, it became ‘the umbilical cord that

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<sup>362</sup> Dawes, p. 74.

<sup>363</sup> William ‘Lez’ Henry, ‘Reggae, Rasta and the Role of the Deejay in the Black British Experience’, *Contemporary British History*, 26 (2012), pp. 355–373 (p. 363) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2012.703024>> [20 June 2019].

connected [his] generation of Jamaican youth to Jamaica'.<sup>364</sup> The lyrics of reggae songs also helped to introduce a rhetoric and a mindset conducive to the development of a culture of resistance. At their heart, messages of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, as well as strong affirmations of the community's 'roots', functioned as cultural forces that sharpened the consciousness of a whole generation facing racism on a daily basis. With its militancy, reggae became an 'important antidote to four hundred years of colonial brainwashing'.<sup>365</sup> As the nexus of a culture of resistance to social, racial and economic marginalisation, reggae lyrics, couched in the Rastafarian militancy of postcolonial Jamaica, resonated strongly within the UK context. As LKJ explains:

It was as though we were still waging anti-colonial struggles here and we were struggling against marginalisation. So we could identify with all the sentiments that were being expressed about oppression in Jamaica [and relate them] to our experiences here with the police, with the judiciary, with the schooling system, with the place of work, clashes in the streets with fascists and all of that.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Joe Lowndes, 'Linton Kwesi Johnson and Black British Struggle'. *Africa is a Country*. 26 May 2017. Blog. Available at <<https://africasacountry.com/2017/05/linton-kwesi-johnson-and-black-british-struggle/>> [07 May 2018].

<sup>365</sup> Sonia Sabelli, "“Dubbing di Diaspora” Gender and Reggae Music inna Babylon", *Social Identities*, 17 (2011), pp. 137-152 (p. 148) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2011.531910>> [17 June 2018]. In 1975, LKJ wrote an article about the commodification and commercialization of reggae music, mainly as reflected in the figure of Bob Marley. His comments displayed some ambivalence towards the popularity of the famous singer, seen as the new 'king of rock'. The introduction that he wrote in 2006 to precede this article in the *Rock History Reader* clarifies his position (Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Roots and Rock: The Marley Enigma', in *The Rock History Reader*, ed. Theo Cateforis (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 157-158. The original source is Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Roots and Rock: The Marley Enigma', *Race Today*, 7 (1975), pp. 237-238 ).

<sup>366</sup> Caspar Melville, 'Bass Culture Research Project: Linton Kwesi Johnson Interviewed by Caspar Melville'. Project funded by the AHRC, unpublished transcript, used with permission.

Reggae acted as a ‘communicative device’ that infused a whole generation, of which dub poets were part, with political awareness.<sup>367</sup> Dub poetry was a product of this sensibility. Like other forms of art, it explores the creative power of reggae music. Indeed, in the liner notes of the CD of a cappella versions that accompanies the collection *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, LKJ’s comment on the poems ‘Bass Culture’ and ‘Reggae Sounds’ refers to this power: ‘In different ways both talk about the creative energy of reggae music, its rootedness in a culture of resistance and its liberating potential’. This nicely resonates with Dawes’s exploration of reggae’s influence on other forms of art.

Yet *Natural Mysticism* is only a step on the ladder to access the wider creative convergence between poetry and music, as it focuses exclusively on reggae. I am not arguing that the book completely overlooks wider connections in theorising a reggae aesthetic. Through the figure of Bob Marley, Dawes shows how reggae is an important transnational cultural product that nonetheless developed to address the specific concerns of a working-class Jamaican social experience. Responding to reggae’s global network of musical production, distribution and reception, the elaboration of this aesthetic similarly negotiates the local and the transnational. Moreover, Dawes’s personal experience living in Ghana, Jamaica, the USA, Canada and Britain also helped him to realise reggae’s importance in reconnecting travelling selves to the homeland of Jamaica. Reggae is ‘a passage home’ that creates a dialogue between the local and the transnational without

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<sup>367</sup> Sabelli, “‘Dubbing di Diaspora’ Gender and Reggae Music inna Babylon”, p. 148.

tying the notion of home to a specific place.<sup>368</sup> Based on his own experience, Dawes sees the reggae aesthetic as the catalyst for an assemblage of ‘belonging’ and ‘roots’ with an international appeal. He also notes that his theory ‘is best understood in relation to similar efforts by African American critics who have discussed the aesthetics of blues, gospel, and jazz as defining impulses in the shaping of a distinctive African American aesthetic’.<sup>369</sup> Yet *Natural Mysticism* conceptualises the reggae aesthetic exclusively within the context of reggae music and Jamaica’s national boundaries.<sup>370</sup> Looking at dub poetry from this single-minded perspective similarly neglects and even depreciates the creative web in which reggae influences its poetics. Without a recognition of the network underlying the creation of the poetry, reggae is reductively understood as a marker of ‘roots’ in a postcolonial cultural context. As LKJ rightly notes, ‘for Dawes dub poetry is only interesting when it points to the possibilities for a reggae aesthetic’.<sup>371</sup>

Reggae’s predominance in dub poetry has directed analytical attention to this type of music only. Yet even when scholars note an artistic convergence, they allude to the role and place of reggae only superficially:

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<sup>368</sup> John McLeod, “‘Wheel and Come Again’: Transnational Aesthetics beyond the Postcolonial’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 7 (2001), pp. 85-99 (p. 95) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41274148>> [12 March 2018].

<sup>369</sup> Dawes, p. 19.

<sup>370</sup> Lynn Washington’s thesis is the only academic work I have found that seriously investigates the transnational aspect of the reggae aesthetic: Lynn Washington, ‘Reggae Got the Blues’: The Blues Aesthetic in African American Literature as a Lens for the Reggae Aesthetic in Anglophone Caribbean Literature’, 2013). This transnational relationship is of course circular. Amiri Baraka’s poetry collection *Reggae or Not!* explicitly refers to a network in which reggae-poetry and jazz-poetry echo each other’s musicality (Amiri Baraka, *Reggae or Not!* (New York: Contact II Publications, 1981).

<sup>371</sup> Johnson, ‘Remembering Michael Smith’, p. 156.

Not only have the dub poets adapted the rhythms, terminology and techniques of reggae in their own developing poetic technique [...]. Many, such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, have also sought to explore reggae as the basis of a wider range of cultural forms and cultural phenomena.<sup>372</sup>

As James Procter rightly notes, studies of dub poetry demonstrate ‘a neglect of the textual and literary concerns of Johnson’s writing and the way in which it represents a critical and selective *appropriation* of reggae and rasta discourse.’<sup>373</sup>

Between music and literature there is a creative distance, a space in which metamorphoses of poetic invention happen. In this process, poets make stylistic choices influenced by the move between musical and literary environments.

Despite the fact that reggae was the soundtrack of dub poetry’s era of birth, the creative inspiration that dub poetry took from music goes beyond both the soundtrack and the era.<sup>374</sup>

In chapter 2, I discussed Brathwaite’s use of jazz in dialogue with other uses of the blues and jazz across the black Atlantic, and more specifically in the United States. His commitment to music on both theoretical and poetic levels is an

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<sup>372</sup> Sarah Lawson Welsh, ‘The Literature of Trinidad and Jamaica’, in *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: English- and Dutch- Speaking Countries*, ed. James Arnold (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 69-97 (p. 86).

<sup>373</sup> Procter, p. 105.

<sup>374</sup> In a BBC documentary available on YouTube, LKJ is in conversation with the legendary jazzman and poet Shake Keane. Their dialogue testifies to a shared interest in a poetics with a role and place for music well beyond just reggae (*Rhythms of the World: Shake Keane and Linton Kwesi Johnson*. BBC 2. 1992. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oX6S8BNZPY>> [16 March 2017]). Similarly, Michael Smith’s comment on his identification with Langston Hughes shows an interest in the convergence between poetry and music beyond reggae: ‘We identify the same thing we find run through Langston Hughes poems. Langston Hughes have a blues mood go through it, and we just feel seh, well, we have something, and we seh boy it was the beat’ (Morris, p. 103).

example of exploring ‘the wider possibilities of a poetics of musicality’.<sup>375</sup> This chapter continues this exploration of how music can catalyse the creation of a poetic language. It acknowledges the relationship between music and the poet’s creativity. The following discussion uses the term a poetics of musicality to refer to an unexplored convergence at the level of poetics where we can analyse the role and place of music in dub poetry well beyond a simple recognition of reggae played by a band to look at.

A poetics of musicality emerges from an intertextuality between music and writing. This intertextuality is a common focus of interdisciplinary studies. Poetry is often characterised as musical, as Sarah Stickney Ellis’s early nineteenth-century comment shows: ‘[...] there is in poetry itself, a cadence – a perceptible harmony, which delights the ear while the eye remains unaffected’.<sup>376</sup> The sonic aspect of a recited poem is often used as the analytical ground on which this convergence is acknowledged. The sound of poetry suggests musical analogies that are often discussed as the musicality of the poetry. Yet in discussing these similarities, experts ‘have historically been unable to agree on what musicality is, what its components are, and how it should be measured’.<sup>377</sup> The point here is not to restrict my approach to musicality to a fixed set of measurable factors. As David Roesner summarises, the understanding of poetry’s musicality rests on different kinds of relations, such as, for instance, “combination”, ‘replacement’, ‘influence’,

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<sup>375</sup> Alison Donnell and Welsh Sarah Lawson, ‘Introduction 1966-1979’, in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, ed. Alison Donnell and Welsh Sarah Lawson (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 226-238 (p. 237).

<sup>376</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Poetry of Life* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1835), p. 168.

<sup>377</sup> Mary Louise Serafine, *Music as Cognition: The Development of Thought in Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 10.

'correspondence', 'analogy', 'transposition', 'translation', 'mutual implication', 'quotation', 're-presentation', 'simile' and, of course, 'metaphor'.<sup>378</sup> This quote illustrates a wide range of possible interactions, as well as a variety of terms and concepts for discussing intertextuality between music and literature. The assemblage of poetic devices shaped by the poet's inspiration from music happens as a sort of contamination. Understood here in a positive sense, music triggers innovations that become characteristic of the poet's style. It is important to understand that in this intertextuality, the notion of music goes beyond the aural sphere. It is more than sound: it has auditory and non-auditory qualities. What is understood as music and how we interpret its meaning is obviously fluid and open to debate:

[...] music is whatever people choose to recognize as such, and its meanings are constituted by an open-ended interpretative process. [...] Music is thus plural and dynamic, and its meanings are relative to a potentially infinite range of interpretative variables.<sup>379</sup>

I include this non-normative and open notion of music in my discussion of a poetics of musicality. My analysis of this intertextuality interrogates both auditory and non-auditory qualities of music. By going beyond the recognition and location of musicality in the sound of poetry, I want to show how a poetics of musicality is the outcome of a poem's connection with other qualities of this non-normative kind of music, such as symbols, images, ideologies, messages, sensations, moods. They

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<sup>378</sup> David Roesner, *Musicality in Theatre: Music as Model, Method and Metaphor in Theatre-Making* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 19. See his footnotes on the same page for further references to these relations in literature.

<sup>379</sup> Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 201.

function as fundamental sites of identification for the poet's stylistic innovation.<sup>380</sup>

My close reading of the print version of 'Street 66' unpacks a convergence between the poet's lived experiences of musical events in his everyday life and a particular lexicon in the presentation of a poetics of musicality. This lexicon is influenced by modes of expression—particular symbols and messages—and by bodily sensations experienced in the culture of sound systems, reggae and, more generally, bass culture. Then, moving from the written text to the recorded versions, I further identify this poetics of musicality in the way the poet uses his voice to bring into the performance the presence of music, specifically that of the bass. The sonic dimension of the performed poem is now the site of this intertextuality. Here, the actual sound of reggae bass plays a dynamic role in offering new possibilities of expression. I navigate between these different levels of analysis to show how this poetics carries a complex set of gestures towards music. It enters the poem from different angles.

The phrase 'bass culture', probably coined by LKJ, who used it to title a poem and later recycled it as the name of one of his albums, is commonly employed as an umbrella term for heavy bass-driven subgenres of reggae music, such as ska, dub, jungle, drum and bass, garage, dubstep and grime. Lloyd Bradley used it to title his well-known book about the history of reggae, which discusses how the production, diffusion and consumption of heavy bass govern a repertoire of practice and theory. The book extends the term 'bass culture' beyond a simple

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<sup>380</sup> LKJ's writing is not the only example of imagination being stimulated by music. For a discussion of how symbols found in music are used in the creation of literature, see, for instance, Robert Fotsing Mangoua ed., *L'Imaginaire Musical dans les Littératures Africaines* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

reference to the music: it also refers to ‘a people... a culture... it’s an attitude, it’s a way of life coming out of a people’.<sup>381</sup> Veal similarly explains that the prominence of low frequencies that characterises bass culture ‘became a musical signifier invested with the same types of resonance associated with “swing” in jazz or “clave” in Afro-Cuban music – a musical signifier of a Jamaican cultural ethos.’<sup>382</sup> Bass culture can therefore be loosely interpreted. It is ‘as much about the instruments, the techniques and performances captured in the recordings as it is about the culture and location of our [Jamaicans’] accumulated experience’.<sup>383</sup> In dub poetry, the accumulated experience signified by bass culture plays a significant role in the poetic discourse. Not basing their work on essentialist connections, the poets find in this culture discursive motives that they can engage with. Beyond words, bass culture offers a nonverbal discourse that happens and is recognised in the depth of the bass. As already mentioned, it is in the low frequencies, in their vibrations, that bass culture functions as a signifier of a Jamaican cultural ethos.

LKJ’s article ‘Jamaican Rebel Music’, written in 1976 for the journal *Race and Class*, uses the bass as a central element of his sociological analysis. Here he presents his views on the relationship between sound structure and social

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<sup>381</sup> Rupie Edwards, quoted in Lloyd Bradley, *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. n.p. This idea of culture as a way of life is of course not new. Raymond Williams, for example, proposes what he calls ‘the “social” definition of culture, in which culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour’ (Raymond Williams, ‘The Analysis of Culture’, in *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), pp. 57-70 (p. 57)).

<sup>382</sup> Veal, p. 60.

<sup>383</sup> Mykaell Riley, ‘Bass Culture: An Alternative Soundtrack to Britishness’, in *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, ed. Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) (p. 114).

structure. Quoting Gordon Rohlehr's discussion of the articulation of power in the bass, he writes: "Each new weight of pressure" in the society, says Rohlehr, "has its corresponding effect on the music, and the revolution is usually felt first as a perceptible change in the bass".<sup>384</sup> In the heavy weight of the bass, mirroring the economic and social situation of the oppressed, low frequencies carry the power to overthrow the oppression of Babylon. The bass and its low frequencies, which create a rhythmic pulse, are a site of social change, of emancipation. They carry a revolutionary spirit that gives them the agency to function as a destabilising force. In LKJ's 'Bass Culture', the culture alters when the beat shifts, scattering oppression over a smashed wall:

an di beat jus lash  
when di wall mus smash  
an di beat will shiff  
as di culture alltah  
when oppression scatah<sup>385</sup>

The bass is a weapon against oppression but also a reflection of oppressive forces.<sup>386</sup> The relationship between semantic meaning and/or interpretation and sound is obviously complex. At the crossroads of musical and sociological studies, this relationship has been interpreted in many ways. It is important to remember that interpretations of these low frequencies are based on unstable linguistic codes. The combination of sines and signs, to use Tobias Van Veen's vocabulary, happens within a context of flexible yet shared interpretations.<sup>387</sup> There is an

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<sup>384</sup> Johnson, 'Jamaican Rebel Music', p. 401, original quote in Gorden Rohler, 'After-Thoughts', *BIM*, 14 .

<sup>385</sup> Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, p. 12.

<sup>386</sup> This double function of the bass is reminiscent of Fanon's view of violence, discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>387</sup> Sines, or sine waves, are the waveforms created by the vibrations of the bass. 'Sines' hence refers to the frequencies of the bass. Here, signs are the coded meanings found in the sines. For further discussion of sines and signs, see Tobias C. Van Veen, 'Victims

overlap here between what is said—the signs—and how it is said: the sines. The connotations created by the overlapping of signs and sines are conveyed from a particular discursive site, which corresponds to the low frequencies. In this dialogue between signs and sines, music is not just a way of conveying meaning. Bass culture is also lived through physical sensations.

The heaviness and the predominance of the bass's low frequencies gives bass culture a sensory dimension. Low frequencies are not just heard. They are also felt: here there is a corporeal response to sound. This overlap can be explained by the human capacity to feel rather than hear a sound when its frequency is too low. It is known that most people can hear a clear bass sound down to around 30 hertz.<sup>388</sup> Beyond that point, the bass is felt rather than heard.<sup>389</sup> This bodily dimension of the reception of music—in other words, the bodily encounter with sound—is a fundamental aspect of bass culture. It is not clear where the need to emphasise the bass in reproduced sound originated, but this aesthetic is clearly linked to the music production process. Indeed, as Hitchins explains in his

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Themselves of a Close Encounter: On the Sensory Language and Bass Fiction of Space Ape (In Memoriam)', *Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*, 7 (2015), pp. 86-115 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2015.07.02.05>> [16 March 2017]. For brief overviews of common connotations in the bass, see, for instance, Katherine McKittrick, 'Rebellion/Invention/Groove', *Small Axe* 49 (2016) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-3481558>> [09 June 2018]; Christopher Partridge, 'Popular Music Affective Space and Meaning', in *Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch and Jolyon Mitchell (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 182-193.

<sup>388</sup> A piano's lowest C vibrates at roughly 33 hertz.

<sup>389</sup> Partridge, 'Popular Music', p. 191. For a concise explanation of how the body interprets the sonic waves of low frequencies as sensations rather than simply sound, and the effect of this interpretation in sound system culture, see Sebastian R.C. Davies, "Who Feels it Knows it": Re-Thinking Knowledge, Resistance and Community through the Sub-Bass of the Reggae Sound System', *Riffs Journal*, pp. 24-32 <<http://riffsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Sebastien-Davies.pdf>> [24 July 2019]. This article also explains how the physical sensations created by the vibrations within a crowd have relational and binding power: 'This sensation, the culmination of electrical and chemical signals in the brain, causes a further by-product to be released, namely the affective response visible and audible in the crowd as they "get on" the same frequency as the sound system' (Davies, "Who Feels it Knows it", p. 29).

insightful book on Jamaican sound, low frequencies are an undeniable aspect of the recording process, which are then translated into a form of experience in the sound system.<sup>390</sup> This element was already significant by the late 1950s. In discussion with Lloyd Bradley, Jah Vego explained that the emphasis on the bass makes the music danceable: ‘We dance down there with our waist and hips [Vego jumps to his feet and nimbly win’s up his waist] we need the bass. The music have to hit you down there and for that we need the big bass’.<sup>391</sup>

The sound system, which creates this cultural space where the sound of bass culture circulates, makes music both heard and felt. Because human hearing is less sensitive to lower frequencies, the bass, in order to ‘sound right’, is played substantially louder than the rest of the instruments, and sound system dances are indeed characterised by clear and audible heavy bass. Intensified by sonic manipulation, the frequencies of the bass physically affect the entire body. These bodily sensations are recognised as a fundamental feature of the sound system:

Bass represents the hardest frequency range to reproduce in an amplified music system and therefore the undistorted reproduction of low frequency is an attribute of a sound system that Jamaicans associate with ‘quality’. [...] A ‘good’ sound-reproduction system should be capable of producing bass that can be physically felt as well as heard.<sup>392</sup>

My discussion of a poetics of musicality recognises this encounter between body and music as an inspiring space where the poet explores innovative stylistic traits. Feelings produced by the vibrations of low frequencies bring a sensory dimension

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<sup>390</sup> Hitchins, pp. 73-97.

<sup>391</sup> Bradley, p. 118. Jah Vego is a famous Jamaican DJ/selector from Nothing Hill, London.

<sup>392</sup> Hitchins, p. 83.

into his/her poetics.

Bass's central place in reggae, and more generally in bass culture, powerfully affected LKJ's artistic development. Indeed, throughout his career he has expressed a strong commitment to the bass guitar. In many of his interviews, he mentions playing bass while composing his lyrics. Asked whether he is a bass player, he replied:

I wouldn't go that far. I mean, I've played bass on somebody else's record; I've never played bass on one of mine. I've played bass on an album called Peeni Waali, which I'm going to be putting out on LKJ Records, by a Swiss musician called Fitzè. [...] And I composed a tune for him, an instrumental, and played the bass myself. But I've never dared to play it on one of my own records.<sup>393</sup>

In an interview with the journalist Maya Jaggi, he said: 'I always have a bass line at the back of my mind when I write'.<sup>394</sup> In his conversation with Sue Lawley, he further mentioned that if he had to go to a desert island, he would take a bass guitar as his only object.<sup>395</sup> More recently, in an interview for the research project 'Bass Culture', he explained:

I wanted to write reggae poetry because for me the bass guitar sounded as though it was speaking. Like it was a talking bass. So I wanted to write words

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<sup>393</sup> Beaumont, 'Black Power, People's Power: A Conversation With Linton Kwesi Johnson'. 29 March 2011. Blog. Available at <<http://dopefolksrecords.blogspot.com/2011/03/conversation-with-linton-kwesi-johnson.html>> [16 January 2019].

<sup>394</sup> Raphaël Costambeys-Kempczynki, 'Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Eloquence of Rioters'. PopMatters. 2009. Web site. Available at <<http://www.popmatters.com/column/68919-linton-kwesi-johnson-and-the-eloquence-of-rioters/P1/>> [18 June 2017], quoting Maya Jaggi, 'Poet on the Front Line', *Mail and Guardian Online*, 28 June 2002<<https://mg.co.za/article/2002-06-28-poet-on-the-front-line>> [30 June 2019]

<sup>395</sup> Sue Lawley Interviewes Linton Kwesi Johnson. Poets on Desert Island Discs. 2002. BBC Radio 4. Available at <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00947g4>> [25 May 2017].

that sounded like a bass line. I wanted my meter to be the meter of the bass line and the speech, the actual vocalising of the words to be like the reggae bass line [...]. Then the importance of the bass, once vocalized in the word (whether spoken or written), is also translated in the way the poem is recorded. Not just how it is put into music, but how the recorded sound brings the right type of bass.<sup>396</sup>

Although the concept of bass culture is often interpreted as a Jamaican innovation, the presence of low frequencies was already important in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. This book is the story of an unknown narrator who struggles with his sense of identity and the position imposed on him by American society: 'I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.'<sup>397</sup> Although he feels like everybody else, this blindness in the eyes of the people around him is a constant reminder of his racial difference. Adapting to this imposed invisibility, he moves into the rent-free basement of a whites-only apartment building. There he steals electricity from Monopolated Light & Power to light his room with 1,369 bulbs. Because of his social and geographical invisibility, the company is unable to discover his location or his identity.

The prologue introduces the narrator's encounter with the transformative power of sound. The sensations created by listening to music awaken a self-awareness in his perception of his body. These sensations allow him to feel. This is an alternative mode of being, in which he finds a way to live outside the

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<sup>396</sup> Melville, 'Bass Culture Research Project: Linton Kwesi Johnson Interviewed by Caspar Melville'. Project funded by the AHRC, unpublished transcript, used with permission.

<sup>397</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Book, 1952), p. 3.

invisibility imposed upon him, contradicting the erasure of his black presence in society. Music and its vibrations create sensations that connect the protagonist to his body. In his underground living space, listening to Louis Armstrong's 'Black and Blue' (composed by Fats Waller) while high on marijuana, he hears, underneath the music, an old woman singing a spiritual. One level deeper in the underworld of sound is 'a beautiful girl the color of ivory'. Her voice sounds like that of the protagonist's mother 'as she [stands pleading] before a group of slave owners who bid for her naked body'. One level below this haunting sound of slavery, someone preaches a sermon, the 'Blackness of Blackness'.<sup>398</sup> Tearing himself away, the protagonist hears the spiritual singer moaning and asks her what is wrong. She responds with an ambiguous description of her love-hate relationship with her master, who is also her son's father. Throughout her moan runs a mixture of 'happiness, sadness and resistance'.<sup>399</sup> Painfully extricating himself from this drug-induced hallucination, the protagonist

somehow I came out of it, ascending hastily from this underworld of sound to hear Louis Armstrong innocently asking,

*What did I do  
To be so black  
And blue?*<sup>400</sup>

His encounters within Armstrong's song were exhausting and terrifying. But the protagonist then admits that the experience aroused a wide range of enjoyable sensations:

And yet, it was a strangely satisfying experience for an invisible man to hear the

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<sup>398</sup> Ellison, p. 9.

<sup>399</sup> Nicole Brittingham Furlonge, 'To Hear the Silence of Sound': Making Sense of Listening in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man', *Interference Journal* pp. 1-12 (p. 7) <<http://www.interferencejournal.com/archives/181>> [4 October 2017].

<sup>400</sup> Ellison, p. 12.

silence of sound. I had discovered unrecognized compulsions of being – even though I could not answer “yes” to their promptings.<sup>401</sup>

To intensify these sensations, he wants to have five phonographs, to be immersed in a sonic environment. He wants to not only hear but also feel with his entire body the sound of Armstrong’s music, the vibrations of its low frequencies. In his encounter with music, the protagonist moves between senses:

When I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I’d like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing “What Did I do to Be so Black and Blue” – all at the same time.<sup>402</sup>

As said above, this experience of sound creates new ways of being. Vibrations have the power to produce new possibilities for his life. The book ends with an open question:

Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?<sup>403</sup>

These words continue to refer to a transfer of senses. From the unseen visual ('invisible', 'your eyes were looking through') to the unheeded audible ('a disembodied voice', 'what else but try to tell you'), the narrator directs his readers' attention to what they have missed. In particular, to find the voice of a body that has been erased by a racist gaze, he urges his audience to listen to what is being said on the low frequencies. These final lines are an invitation to recognise a form of existence expressed in the deep structure of sound. In his search for his own humanity, sensations created by low frequencies stimulate the awareness of his

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<sup>401</sup> Ellison, p. 13.

<sup>402</sup> Ellison, p. 8.

<sup>403</sup> Ellison, p. 581.

individual self, his own body. This physicality, the sensation of feeling sound, cannot be taken away by racist deletion. In *Invisible Man*, the protagonist encounters this mode of survival while alone in his basement. His self-discovery thus has an individual aspect. The discovery of his self in the low frequencies responds to his personal search for a sense of humanity. Yet the low frequencies in the bass line of Armstrong's 'Black and Blue' have a communal appeal. As the book's final words demonstrate, the deep structure from which the protagonist speaks addresses and includes a collective 'you'. It is a 'you' whose sense of being has been shaped by the experience of racism—but also by the sensations of bodily encounters with music that happen outside the dictated norms of racism.

For LKJ, the vibrations of the reggae bass similarly shape a social environment and a mode of being. As the above discussion of bass culture showed, these vibrations carry a revolutionary spirit. They destabilise the order created by colonial and imperialist structures, confronting the political domination, economic inequality and social injustice found in these structures. In LKJ's poem 'Reggae Sound', the bass carries a particular history: 'bass history is a moving / is a hurting black story'.<sup>404</sup> The narrative of this history is shared through the concept of bass culture and circulates in the low frequencies of reggae bass. As opposed to the hidden and individual space of the Invisible Man's basement, the communal space of the sound system is where LKJ's low frequencies speak from. As Sebastian R. C. Davies notes, these frequencies have 'a common affective force', unifying the people at a dance 'as they are pushed forward into the actual by the semantic-

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<sup>404</sup> Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, p. 15.

relational event of the sub-bass interaction'.<sup>405</sup> Despite their different contexts, Ellison and LKJ both use the affirmation of feelings generated in the body by encounters with low frequencies. In their respective environments, both marked and fractured by racial tensions and marginalisation, low frequencies have the power to transform the self, functioning on a fine line between physical reality and metaphorical fantasy. Beyond the here and now of the bodily sensations created by sonic vibrations, there are ontological frequencies, shared and recognised across the black diaspora, 'in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity'.<sup>406</sup> Intertextuality between LKJ's poetics and Ellison's prose has already been noticed. Gilroy's essay 'Between the Blues and the Blues Dance' suggests that LKJ's poem 'Bass Culture' is a response to Ellison's question on the last page of *Invisible Man*.<sup>407</sup> This essay starts the conversation on the importance of low frequencies in a diasporic framework, hinting at a creative dialogue in which their transformative power impacts modes of being as well as modes of writing.

Today, the influence of low frequencies found in Ellison's book on LKJ's writing choices remains an underanalysed dimension of his work. Its recognition is made

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<sup>405</sup> Davies, "Who Feels it Knows it", p. 29.

<sup>406</sup> Davies, "Who Feels it Knows it", p. 30, quoting José Esteban Muñoz, 'Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism', in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 452-463 (p. 453).

<sup>407</sup> Paul Gilroy, 'Between the Blues and the Blues Dance: Some Soundscapes of the Black Atlantic', in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003). Henriques, in a continuation of Gilroy's comments, also sees in Ellison's novel an early presence of a bass culture: 'An even earlier [than in LKJ's work] iteration of this idea of a bass culture comes in the introduction to *Invisible Man* where novelist Ralph Ellison (1947) discusses the special significance of the bass vibrations or "the lower frequencies" for his hero's sense of identity' (Julian Henriques, 'Sonic Diaspora, Vibrations and Rhythm: Thinking through the Sounding of the Jamaican Dancehall Session', *African and Black Diaspora* 1(2008), pp. 215-236 (p. 234) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17528630802224163>> [10 November 2017]).

particularly difficult because he has never mentioned *Invisible Man* as opening the door to the exploration of such poetics. Yet I read these final lines as an invitation to think about a form of expression that uses the low frequencies of sound as a creative force. LKJ responded to such an invitation with an aesthetic committed to the bass and its representation in the poetics. Within these two contexts of the black Atlantic, the bass brings a series of recognised sensations that connect bodies, a sensory experience of ‘feeling with’. Nathaniel Mackey borrows Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s phrase ‘a vibration society’ to refer to the diasporic relationships created by this ‘feeling with’ produced by the low frequencies of music.<sup>408</sup> Low frequencies stir up feelings that connect, that resonate, that vibrate, creating relationships between members of these diasporic communities. I use the relational power of the bass to trace a network of intertextuality in which the poetics of musicality in dub poetry found inspiration.

The bass remains an underanalysed site of investigation in studies of music’s creative power in poetics, as Steve Goodman notes in *Sonic Warfare*:

Bass demands more theoretical attention, as it is too often equated with a buzzing confusion of sensation and therefore the enemy of clear auditory perception and, by implication, clear thought. But for many artists, musicians, dancers, and listeners, vibratory immersion provides the most conductive environment for movements of the body and movements of thought.<sup>409</sup>

It is true that using vibrations as a site of study and interpretation in academia

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<sup>408</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, *Blue Fasa* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2015), p. xi.

<sup>409</sup> Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and The Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 79.

'might seem a slippery and impracticable concept'.<sup>410</sup> Yet in this chapter I concentrate on a poetics inspired by vibrations and physical feelings, making music not only a useful but an indispensable tool for analysing choices in the development of a particular expression in dub poetry. The bass's creative consequences for stylistic choices must be thoroughly analysed. This chapter thus reconnects music, sensations and poetics within a creative continuum in a bass culture that vibrates beyond a strictly Caribbean context. My analysis of this continuum, discussed under the term a poetics of musicality, employs the theoretical tool of *Stimmung*. This is a useful concept to situate the influence of music in unexplored spaces such as the mood or the atmosphere of a poem. A reading of *Stimmung* deepens one's sensitivity to the means by which music inspires the creation of a poetic language.

### ***Stimmung***

The notion of *Stimmung* has been used across a variety of studies, at different historical moments.<sup>411</sup> Here *Stimmung* is used in line with the literary application found in Hans Gumbrecht's *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*. In this book, he explains that *Stimmung*, translated as the 'atmosphere' or the 'mood' of a literary

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<sup>410</sup> Gayle Wald, 'Soul Vibrations: Black Music and Black Freedom in Sound and Space', *American Quarterly*, 63 (2011), pp. 673-696 (p. 676) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41237571>> [03 July 2019]. The jazz musician Sun Ra thought 'of human beings as sonic snowflakes, each person emitting vibrations with distinct tones and colors', while Rahsaan Roland Kirk 'often claimed that he dwelled in a realm of spirits, dreams, and vibrations' (Wald, 'Soul Vibrations: Black Music and Black Freedom in Sound and Space', pp. 676-677).

<sup>411</sup> *Stimmung* is indebted to a philosophical heritage that includes, among others, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merlau-Ponty, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Walter Benjamin (Rex Ferguson, 'Gumbrecht, Faulkner and the Presence of Heat', *Textual Practice*, 31 (2017), pp. 1361-1378 (p. 1362) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1237995>> [04 June 2018]).

work, arises from the readers' encounter with the text. *Stimmung*, in other words, is defined by the reader's inner feeling. As this feeling is brought into the interpretation of the text, *Stimmung* is made part of the work, materialising as a feature of the text. In the unresolved debate over a text's capacity to convey something outside itself, Gumbrecht proposed the concept of *Stimmung* to think of a position that does not rely on an either/or solution:

“Reading for *Stimmung*” always means paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality – something that can catalyse inner feelings without matters of representation necessarily being involved.<sup>412</sup>

The above quote, in clearly linking *Stimmung* to a work's textual dimension, shows that it is not produced ‘outside’ the text. Nonetheless, ‘reading for *Stimmung*’ keeps literary interpretations connected to textual elements without being strictly committed to the semantic meanings of words or their representations. Technically speaking, the coincidence of these two parameters requires the development of an interpretation based on textual details and a recognition of ‘the complex cultural situations that shape literature and resonate with it’.<sup>413</sup> An analysis of *Stimmung*, in other words, reveals the reader's capacity to relate the text and its material elements to the ephemeral, and hence immaterial, cultural environment from which it emerged. As the reader encounters the text, this

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<sup>412</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature [Stimmungen lesen]* trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>413</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, ‘Reading for the Stimmung? About the Ontology of Literature Today’, *Boundary 2*, 35 (2008), pp. 213-221 (p. 214)  
<<https://read.dukeupress.edu/boundary-2/article-pdf/35/3/213/231799/b2035-03-07GumbrechtFpp.pdf>> [30 May 2018].

cultural environment resonates between the lines to create a particular atmosphere, mood, *Stimmung*. The different interpretations produced by the *Stimmung* are not the result of subjective feelings. Indeed, the reader feels the ‘vibes’, the sensations, the feelings that surrounded the creation of the work. In Gumbrecht’s literary practice, the necessity for *Stimmung* is expressed through a ‘more or less philosophical’ argument based on ‘the relationship we entertain with things-in-the-world’.<sup>414</sup> In the world outside a text, interpretations of things intrinsically pass through body and senses. *Stimmung* is therefore a response to and a recuperation of this interpretive mode. This study’s use of *Stimmung* is further justified by its capacity to materialise the intangible context that hosted the creation of dub poetry. Today this is a particularly important move, as it recognises and calls attention to this cultural context in a political climate that tends to deny the existence of these spaces of diasporic exchange, and therefore their creative impact on our contemporary world. Finally, as studies of dub poetry tend to focus almost exclusively on the semantic dimensions of words because of their political content, the concept of *Stimmung* allows a reorientation of critical attention beyond matters of textual representation. It opens analytical doors to move past sociological readings. *Stimmung* offers the possibility of discussing this poetry as part of a ‘sphere of aesthetic experience’.<sup>415</sup> It is also a means of addressing the crucial dimension of feelings, of perceived sensations, in the cultural concept of bass culture. By using *Stimmung* as an interpretative framework, I make feelings and affects fundamental elements of my analysis and

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<sup>414</sup> Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, trans. by Butler, p. 6.

<sup>415</sup> Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, trans. by Butler, p. 7.

central to my investigation of culture.

### **'Street 66'**

'Street 66' first appeared in LKJ's poetry collection *Dread Beat and Blood*, published in 1975, in the section 'Dound de Road'.<sup>416</sup> It was then republished in 2002, in the retrospective collection *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, where it is part of the 'Seventies Verse' section, corresponding to LKJ's first artistic phase, characterised by poems such as 'Bass Culture', 'Reggae Sounds', 'Five Nights of Bleeding' and the lesser known 'Klassikal Dub'. In 1980, LKJ recorded 'Street 66' with a band for the album *Bass Culture*. My analysis of the audio versions uses this recording as well as a recording from a live concert in Germany.<sup>417</sup> The poems from this period, including 'Street 66', are strongly marked by an intertextuality with reggae music. Yet while poems such as 'Bass Culture' and 'Reggae Sounds' engage in a generic type of intertextuality by offering general discourse about the type of lived experience that went with the music at that time, 'Street 66' focuses on the particularities of a blues dance in London's local scene. This poem's particular context best represents LKJ's engagement with the local.

The poem opens with a journey into a reggae scene that happens at a blues dance. To convey the feeling of being at this event, the poet specifies the time,

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<sup>416</sup> Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood*, pp. 19-20. In this chapter, I use this version of the written text.

<sup>417</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson. Bass Culture. Island Records. 1980 [CD]; Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Dennis Bovell Dub Band. Street 66. Live at the Capitol in Mannheim Germany. 6 February 1990. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4kDXAalMWc&list=PLa055pGH6QA5KBLaiujGq7dk4J8I60Wrp&index=20>> [18 April 2017]

'six-a-clack', and describes the place: 'de room woz dark-dusk howlin softly'. The reader sees this dance through the eyes of an unknown persona, the narrator. The description, rather than being guided by the narrator's individual experience, carries a strong sense of community where people meet in the same social event. In the second stanza, the shift from the singular pronoun 'I' in 'I felt de sting' to the communal 'wi' in 'how wi move' helps to connect the narrator's personal perspective to that of the community created by this moment of socialisation. The party at Street 66 is a casual event, and the poem is a description of such a typical dance: there is a sense of everyday life here. Music is playing. People are dancing, smoking, high and 'feelin I-ry'.<sup>418</sup> The sense of habit is emphasised by a feeling of knowing, of *déjà vu*, *déjà-vécu*. Indeed, the narrator already knows what the bodily encounter with this music feels like:

when de muzik met I taps,  
I felt de sting, knew de shock

Western, one of the youths present at this blues dance, is cheering up the room, raising the vibe by imitating an imagined visit by the police:

"Street 66," de said man said,  
"any policeman come yah  
will get some righteous raas klaat licks,  
yea man, whole heap a kicks."

This character is introduced with a humorous and playful twist that reflects the irie vibes of the dance. His name alone gives the scene a witty dimension. 'Western' can refer to the American film genre, which became a tool of expression in Caribbean culture in the 1970s, offering rebellious masculine figures who

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<sup>418</sup> 'I-ry', also written 'iry' or 'irie', means 'good'.

embodied the notion of bravado. It can also be an alteration of the popular name Winston, given to Jamaican boys in honour of Churchill.<sup>419</sup> The transformation of this name creates an ironic relationship between the character's identity and the West: probably of Caribbean origin, this man, by using the name Western, reclaims his position in a society that has continuously denied him full entry. Whereas in reality, English society pushes him to the margins, Western, by twisting his name, creates full membership for himself. Another pun is in the double meaning of the word 'licks'. In music, a 'lick' is a short phrase or riff. In the poem, 'some righteous rass klaat licks' can therefore mean the music heard at the dance.<sup>420</sup> The adjective 'righteous' alludes to the notion of righteous music found at the core of roots reggae, also called conscious reggae and couched in Rastafarian ideology, as opposed to the music's more commercial side. Roots reggae lyrics have a strong political and spiritual message. In the poem, such musical licks are righteous because they carry the militancy of this music. The visit of the police, embodying Babylon, will be greeted with some righteous licks backing the chanting down of the oppressive system from the large speakers of the sound system. Outside a musical context, a 'lick' can also be a kick or a quick hit. In the slave trade, this word also referred to whipping and similar physical torture. Here, the lick is an allusion to this history. Entering the space of the blues dance, the police will get some physical hits, some righteous licks. In this case, 'righteous' expresses a sense of justice in the response to the police's presence. Indeed, the poem makes clear

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<sup>419</sup> Wójcik, p. 13.

<sup>420</sup> 'Rass-clate' (rass cloth), here spelt 'rass klaat', reflecting the Jamaican pronunciation, is 'an obscene expletive' that means 'a used sanitary napkin' (Richard Allsopp ed., *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1996), p. 466).

that the police's interruption of the dance is not justified by any wrongdoing. There is no mention of a crime or even an alleged crime that would warrant a search or arrests. It is simply an abuse of authority to stop, and consequently control, this cultural space of self-expression. Although at this point an unjustified visit is only imagined, the end of the poem shows that Western's joke is a premonition of a real interruption. Here again, there is a sense of *déjà vu* and *déjà-vécu*, conveyed not only by the joke's foreshadowing but also by the neutralising effect of its humour: those who laughed earlier at this imagined visit experience the real scene as a recurrent joke, an absurd, yet usual, moment in every blues dance. Outside the poem's narrative, LKJ has explained that rather commonly at blues dances, 'the police raided us, claiming to be looking for runaways, and didn't leave until they'd provoked someone into the kind of anger which led to an arrest'.<sup>421</sup> In an environment where such unjustified searches were part of everyday reality, the police's visit to Street 66 was simply one more abuse of authority. Their interruption of the blues dance continues the delimitation of space between the inside and the outside found in other LKJ poems such as 'Five Nights of Bleeding', analysed in chapter 4. In 'Street 66', the blues dance represents the inside space where a culture of resistance can take root and grow. LKJ explains that as a result of the colour bar and quota policies in certain discos and clubs, black youths created their 'own independent cultural institutions, [such as] the blues dance'.<sup>422</sup> In both the poem and the poet's everyday life, a blues

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<sup>421</sup> Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 286.

<sup>422</sup> Phillips and Phillips, p. 299. Blues dances and sound system dances, as well as black football and cricket leagues, were important spaces where an Afro-Caribbean identity could be preserved, expressed and affirmed (Wójcik, p. 143).

dance functions as an autonomous space where the police enter only by abusing their authority. Through their knocks on the door followed by orders to open it, the police take the place of outsiders trying to force entry into the space. This episode ironically transforms a common scenario around the notion of belonging. As already mentioned, the name ‘Western’ is used to claim a position in a British society. Similarly, in this blues dance, West Indian youths are the insiders. The police, on the other hand, are outsiders in relation to this ‘new Caribbean enclave’.<sup>423</sup>

The description of this blues dance is enhanced by a sensory language that conveys a variety of feelings. This language is influenced by the imagination of a musical environment and brings this musical context into the poem, embedded in a series of sensations that further evoke the music’s presence. From the very first lines, the reader is stimulated by a visual experience combining green and red. Encountered in relation to the social context of a blues dance, where reggae would have been played, these colours bring yellow into the reader’s visual imagination, implicitly evoking the Rastafari flag. Moreover, the darkness of the ‘charcoal’ room can be taken as a complement of the green and red in the first stanza, in this case invoking the Pan-African flag. This set of three symbolic colours places the poem in the lineage of the Afrocentric consciousness found at the heart of reggae and Rastafarianism. The darkness of the room also calls to mind the black triangles of the Jamaican flag. The interpretation of this blues dance, therefore, connects the awareness of a Pan-African black consciousness to a Jamaican context:

de room woz dark-dusk howlin softly

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<sup>423</sup> Procter, p. 39.

six-a-clack,  
charcoal lite defyin site woz  
movin black  
de soun woz muzik mellow steady flow,  
an man-son mind jus mystic red,  
green, red, green ... pure scene.

Similarly, the reader's encounter with the text produces an effect embedded in an auditory imagination. There is, of course, the explicit reference to 'de mitey poet I-Roy', which brings into the reader's mind the timbre of his voice and the sound of his music. Words such as 'soun', 'muzik', 'dance', 'riddim' and 'beat' are also straightforward references which contribute to the reader's imagined musical picture, part of a lexical field that triggers an auditory response. In Meta Du Ewa Jones's terms, these words function as the '*mental* ear's memory'.<sup>424</sup> Their presence on the page creates a music that is heard. Because, as mentioned above, music from a sound system is not only heard but also felt, the response of this auditory imagination is combined with bodily sensations. Indeed, the poem describes the sound coming down the stereo's wire as a felt experience. The music's low frequencies are felt, not just heard, provoking a bodily reaction that is referred to as a 'shock':

cause when de muzik met I taps,  
I felt de sting, knew de shock

In the third stanza, the sound's sensory dimension continues to shape the poetics. Here there is 'vibratin violence', which the reader understands is related to the music's low frequencies, felt in I-Roy's song, for instance. Indeed, in reggae culture, 'riddim', the Jamaican word for rhythm, can refer to the instrumental

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<sup>424</sup> Meta Du Ewa Jones, 'Jazz Prosodies: Orality and Textuality', *Callaloo*, 25 (2002), pp. 66-91 (p. 76) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3300385>> [28 January 2017].

version of a song that emphasises the bass and the drums. The other instruments are played only sporadically, in order to fix the listener's attention on the inner structure of the sound—i.e. the skeleton structure produced by the bass and the drums. Riddim is therefore characterised by emphasised low frequencies. By situating violence in the riddim, the poet alludes to the tension conveyed by bass culture's low frequencies. Here again, references to this vibrating violence participate in the creation of a language that provokes sensations which enter the poem on the level of aesthetic. Received as a 'shock', these frequencies make the body move and dance:

vibratin violence  
is how wi move  
rockin wid green riddim

The pleasure found in the reception of these violent vibrations enters a frame of interpretation where the impact of sound on bodies is recognised as an aesthetic value. Feeling the music from a sound system is a sign of fine-tuned bass in the speakers, which demonstrates the dance's quality. Exposure to such low frequencies has an emotional impact, as the recognition of a good sound system stimulates a feeling of satisfaction.

The physical response to riddim needs to be understood through the lens of the cultural practice of sound systems, discussed in chapter 1. In the poetics of 'Street 66', the description of a dance connects sound, body and mind. The pain that the power of heavy bass can incite is accompanied by a form of aural pleasure.<sup>425</sup> As the text says, the bodily encounter with these low frequencies

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<sup>425</sup> The legendary DJ/selector Jah Shaka operated on the UK sound system scene: 'Some people complain, say Shaka carries too much weight, too much distortion. It's true it can verge on pain when Shaka shakes a sound by the neck till it gives off its secret. He is an

creates a nice feeling:

no man would dance but leap an shake  
dat shock thru feelin ripe

In order to enhance sensations and feelings, weed is consumed throughout the poem. Since intoxication changes one's sensibility and perception of things, smoking weed can increase bodily sensations. Although the action of smoking is not explicitly mentioned, implicit references are important elements that animate the poem's narrative space. In the third stanza, 'de breeze of glory' is a metaphor for the presence of pot. Drifting like a breeze, its smell lingers in the air. The blues dance is described as taking place in a 'dark-dusk' room, suggesting that the people there are consuming pot, whose smoke makes the space foggy. The word 'green' points to the colour of weed, and the expression 'a greena riddim' intimately connects listening to music, especially dub/reggae, and smoking weed. Dub's often-psychedelic sonic structure, the cultural references to ganga in reggae lyrics and even Rastafarianism's spiritual dimension all encourage this simultaneous consumption.

In the poem, smoking creates a meditative mindset with which to embrace the 'mystic red' journey suggested by the music. There are complex mechanisms around weed's place in the reception of dub which cannot be summarised here without reductive analogies, but it is enough for my argument to say that the action of smoking clearly animates the experience of this blues dance:

outta dis rock  
shall come  
a greena riddim

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'extreme artist' (Vivien Goldman, 'Shaka! Spiritual Dub Warrior', *New Music Express*, 21 February 1981). The quote is from Louisa Olufsen Layne, 'Aesthetics and Postcolonial Politics in Linton Kwesi Johnson's Poetry' (Master's thesis, University of Oslo, 2013), p. 38).

even more dread  
dan what  
de breeze of glory bread.

In the above quote, the ‘greena riddim’ is also associated with the concept of dread. In reggae and Rastafarian culture, dread has extended social meanings. The variety of its interpretations, however, hint at a common connotation. First, Joseph Owens defines dread as ‘the awesome, fearful confrontation of a people with a primordial but historically denied racial selfhood’.<sup>426</sup> Dread can be defiance, which makes it a danger, ‘because every stand against injustice invites retribution from those who see inequity as a niggling but necessary byproduct of their barbarism.’<sup>427</sup> In the work of the ska trombonist Don Drummond, Rohlehr sees dread as a ‘brooding melancholy which seems always on the verge of explosion, but which is under some sort of formal control’.<sup>428</sup> The term also conveys ‘the historic tension between slaver and slave, between the cruel ineptitude of power on the part of the rulers, and introspective menace and the dream of Apocalypse on the part of the down-trodden’.<sup>429</sup> From a more general point of view, dread ‘connotes a sense of crisis, whether political or cultural, of apocalyptic nature in which social contradictions cannot be answered except by an intense destabilization of the “order of things.”’<sup>430</sup> When things are going wrong, music answers with a sound whose low frequencies in the bass signify on the instability

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<sup>426</sup> Joseph Owens, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (Kingston: Sangster, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>427</sup> Hitchcock, “It Dread Inna Ingan”: Linton Kwesi Johnson, Dread, and Dub Identity’, p. 10.

<sup>428</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, ‘West India Poetry: Some Problems of Assessment II’, in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, ed. Alison Donnell and Welsh Sarah Lawson (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 258-261 (p. 320).

<sup>429</sup> Rohlehr, p. 322.

<sup>430</sup> Hitchcock, “It Dread Inna Ingan”: Linton Kwesi Johnson, Dread, and Dub Identity’, p. 10.

of the population. Velma Pollard, in her analysis of rasta talk, quotes Robert Lee's less rebellious understanding:

The word 'Dreads' as I understand it means purely, the power that lies within any man that enables him to do or to achieve anything he wants ... To be a 'Dread' therefore is to be conscious of that power, and to be developing one's power-potential for achievement ... Dread becomes therefore a philosophy of life fulfilment.<sup>431</sup>

In the poem, the concept of dread functions within the multiplicity of the above connotations. Dread unfolds a variety of social meanings and brings a syntax and vocabulary of rebellion. Combining it with the vibrating violence of the riddim, the poet roots his poetry in a specific socioeconomic context. The dread of this riddim places Street 66's blues dance in a larger historical context, bringing traces of the continuing struggle against the authoritarian and oppressive colonial power into this local event.

The reader's reception of this poem is stimulated by the ability to imagine feeling, hearing and seeing what is described. These sensations are not random. They are used to bring reggae music and its heavy bass into the poem, beyond the use of only semantic references. This stylistic choice creates a musical presence in the *Stimmung*. As the poem moves from a written to a performed version, the parameters of this sonic context offer new opportunities for poetic innovation: the poet continues his exploration of stylistic choices inspired by music, further developing his poetics of musicality. Staying within an analysis of *Stimmung*, the

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<sup>431</sup> Robert Lee, 'The Dread—A Caribbean Experience', *West Indian World*, 21 March 1975,, quoted in Pollard, p. 55. The presence of dread talk, also known as rasta talk, in 'Street 66' is discussed later in this chapter.

next section investigates the recorded voice as an element that actively evokes and suggests the hearing and feeling of music. In his devout relationship with the bass, the poet finds a creativity that shapes the performance's style. My focus on the voice in this discussion of *Stimmung* is suggested by the term itself, which looks like it could be related to *die Stimme*, German for 'the voice'. A particular use of the voice participates in the creation of a particular *Stimmung*. In 'Street 66', the poet's voice indeed influences the mood conveyed. Here I specifically analyse how the poet uses his voice to evoke the bass and its frequencies.

The voice is a common space to situate intertextuality between music and poetry. It is a sonic element which brings to the poetry a musicality, a musical dimension, that 'break[s] down the barriers between words and music, restoring the fluidity of motion in performance to the frozen-word-on-the-page'.<sup>432</sup> His desire to bring into the performance the presence of the heavy bass of Caribbean culture is a continuation of his search for a decolonised aesthetic.<sup>433</sup> These low frequencies are cultural elements that the poet identifies as part of his Caribbean experience. They function as alternative references to a colonial cultural heritage as they directly speak to a Caribbean reality. The bass and its low frequencies are precious tools of innovation for the exploration of an aesthetic outside the parameters of a colonial tradition. LKJ carries them into the performance of his poetry with stylistic choices in the manipulation of his voice. The performance, as opposed to the written text, allows him to bring into the poetry a sound that fits his experience of Caribbean culture. This desire to connect the poetry's sound to

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<sup>432</sup> Gordon Rohler, *Pathfinder: Black Awakening in the 'Arrivants'* of Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Tunapuna: Gordon Rohler, 1981), p. 69.

<sup>433</sup> See chapter 2.

its cultural environment of course echoes Brathwaite's considerations of sound's importance in decolonised poetry, introduced in *History of the Voice*. There, he explores artistic possibilities for bringing the sound of 'the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience' of the Caribbean into poetry.<sup>434</sup> Both writers investigate stylistic choices for approximating the sound of their environment. In LKJ's poetry, this environmental experience is deeply rooted in the low frequencies of bass culture. Without ignoring the above context on which the performance takes place, I stay with the concept of *Stimmung* to unpack a poetics of musicality in the next section, using the voice as presented in the performance as a site of investigation. This is one route in analysing the intertextuality between music and this poetry, whose larger context of a decolonised aesthetic and its sonic dimension must be approached in counterpoint.

A relationship between the bass and the voice is an acknowledged feature of dub poetry, and in poems such as the emblematic 'Bass Culture', LKJ's voice follows the bass. Despite this recognised feature of performance, however, no study has seriously looked at this relationship beyond the mimetic effect. By interrogating different performances of 'Street 66', the following paragraphs analyse variations in the poet's manipulations of his voice to argue for the exploration of a voice that talks like a bass.

### **A talking bass**

The version of 'Street 66' on the album *Bass Culture* starts with the poet's voice

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<sup>434</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 10.

following the bass line on both melodic and rhythmic levels.<sup>435</sup> They share the same structure. As mentioned above, this doubling of the bass by the voice is an artistic characteristic of other poems as well, used as a way to emphasise the bass as it produces more low frequencies and gives them more weight. In the first stanza, this strategy stops after the fourth line. The poet's voice departs from the bass line on 'de soun woz muzik mellow steady flow', only to return to this fusion in the stanza's next, final two lines:

an man-son mind jus mystic red,  
green, red, green ... pure scene.

The voice and the bass meet a few times throughout the poem. But unlike other poems, such as 'Bass Culture' and 'Reggae Sounds', which use this structural organisation throughout, 'Street 66' breaks the pattern to create a variety of combinations of the voice and the bass. In these variations, the poet explores the possibilities of different tones in order to make 'the actual vocalising of the words to be like the reggae bass line'.<sup>436</sup> Rather than simply use a mimetic structure in which the voice follows the bass, the poet varies the tone of his voice to evoke the frequencies of a reggae bass line in his performance. In musical terms, the bass line of the accompaniment is constructed on a repetition of two bars that play almost the same melodic and rhythmic phrase as each other. This repetition loops throughout the poem, just like an ostinato. I identify these almost identical patterns as, first, the 'high pattern' and, second, the 'low pattern':



<sup>435</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson. Bass Culture. Island Records. 1980 [CD].

<sup>436</sup> Melville, 'Bass Culture Research Project: Linton Kwesi Johnson Interviewed by Caspar Melville'. Project funded by the AHRC, unpublished transcript, used with permission.



Influenced by the alternation between these two, the voice similarly moves between a high and a low pattern, sometimes following the bass's movement, sometimes opposing it. To represent these movements in relation to the pattern of the instrumental bass, I use an up arrow to signify a high tone in the voice ( $\nearrow$ ) and a down arrow to signify a low tone in the voice ( $\searrow$ ). In the lyrics, bold is used to show a mimesis of the bass by the voice in both melodic and rhythmic patterns. Italics represent a crossing of patterns between the voice and the bass—in other words, a mismatch between the two: while the bass uses the high pattern, the voice uses the low pattern. Finally, roman is used to indicate a situation where the voice and the bass follow the same pattern but do not necessarily match in rhythm or melodic line.

As mentioned above, the poem starts with a mimesis by the voice of the bass. The first two lines of the poem, corresponding to the first bar below, are recited in a high tone. The next two lines go down the tonal spectrum of the voice, which here shares the same organisation as the bass on rhythmic and melodic levels. This mimesis is a strategic device to emphasise the bass in the performance:

Although the next lines have a different rhythm and melodic contour, the voice shares the bass's pattern movement, going to a high tone to reflect the high pattern played by the bass:

de soun woz muzik mellow steady flow, ↗

The musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef staff with a dotted half note followed by a series of eighth notes. The bottom staff is also a bass clef staff with a dotted half note followed by a series of eighth notes. A vertical blue line connects the two staves at the end of the first measure. The number '3' is written below the bass staff in the third measure.

After a vocally empty bar of the high pattern played by the instrumental accompaniment, the poet returns to a lower tone in the stanza's final two lines. Here the voice and the bass continue using the same pattern with the same rhythmic and melodic line:

man-son mind jus mystic red, green, red, green ↘ ... pure  
scene. ↗

The musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef staff with a dotted half note followed by a series of eighth notes. The bottom staff is also a bass clef staff with a dotted half note followed by a series of eighth notes. A vertical blue line connects the two staves at the end of the first measure. The number '3' is written below the bass staff in the third measure.

Interestingly, 'pure', delivered on the anacrusis of the high pattern, is consequently recited in a high tone, despite the fact that the printed version suggests it should join 'scene' in being recited over the low pattern. This shift of tone inside a poetic line shows a meticulous organisation of the poet's voice in relation to the bass's movement. Indeed, it is an example of the voice following the bass's high pattern despite the poem's layout:

an man-son mind jus mystic red,  
green, red, green ... pure scene.

As opposed to the first stanza, where six of seven lines are recited with a voice that doubles the bass, the second stanza has only one example of this mirroring effect. After the shared frequencies of its first three lines, the voice and the bass illustrate a crisscrossing of high and low patterns (signified by the use of italics, as mentioned above). The entire passage can be summarised as follows:

no man would dance but leap an shake (high bass – high voice = shared frequencies)  
dat shock thru feelin ripe; (low bass – low voice = shared frequencies)

shape dat soun tumblin doun (low bass – low voice = shared frequencies)  
*makin movement ruff enough; (high bass – low voice = crisscrossing)*  
*cause when de muzik met I taps, (low bass – high voice = crisscrossing)*  
**I felt de sting, knew de shock, (low bass – low voice = doubling)**  
*yea had to do an ride de rock. (high bass – low voice = crisscrossing)*

The vocal doubles the bass only on the line ‘I felt de sting, knew de shock’. This is not accidental. It responds to a desire to highlight the semantic content through a careful manipulation of performative style. Indeed, the line’s semantic meaning refers to the sensations felt when the body encounters the low frequencies of this music. This bodily reaction is referred to here as a ‘shock’. In order to suggest this effect found at the heart of bass culture, the voice and the bass merge. Put another way, the bodily experience created by sound is expressed not only semantically but also by the tone of the voice as it meets the bass in a shared organisation. This vocal doubling of the bass contrasts with the organisation of the previous lines, where the two are quite independent.

The third stanza departs from this blending of content and form. Indeed, the first few lines are delivered in a conversational tone, which has not been heard up to now, creating a distinctive shift. It is the first time that the voice’s rhythm and melodic line significantly depart from the bass’s pattern. This shift reflects the different layout of this section, whose poetic lines are much shorter than those of the other stanzas. This stanza also has the first direct reference to riddim, so one would expect to hear its presence in the voice, illustrating the low frequencies that resonate through the deep structure of a tune by going deeper into the low frequencies of its own tonal spectrum. However, the opposite happens, and the listener is surprised by this mismatch of vocal tone, musical accompaniment and poetic content. Moreover, this unexpected use of the voice shows a crisscrossing

of patterns with the bass. While the voice uses a high tone in the first few lines, the bass plays its low pattern, and vice versa, when the low pattern in the voice is used, the bass plays its high pattern:

outta dis rock shall come a greena riddim ↗ even more dread dan what ↗  
 de breeze of glory bread. ↗ vibratin violence is how wi/move ↗  
 rockin wid green riddim ↘ de drout an dry root out. ↘

'Greena riddim', in the third line of this stanza, is recited in a high tone over the bass's low pattern. Conversely, 'vibratin violence' is recited in a low tone voice over the high pattern of the bass. Here again, one would have expected 'greena riddim' and 'vibratin violence' to follow the bass, in order to highlight the semantic content of the words. It is only on 'rockin wid green riddim' that the voice and the bass meet again around a shared pattern. The sound of the poet's voice imitates, but also supports, the meaning of the words. In order to 'speak' with the vibrating frequencies of this greener riddim, the voice talks like a bass, going into the deeper part of its sonic spectrum.

The fourth stanza continues to explore expressive possibilities in the voice's presentation. It starts with shared patterns in the voice and bass:

de mitey poet I-Roy woz on de wire, ↗  
 Western did a scank ↘ an each one laaf: ↘

Here the poet employs direct speech to introduce a character named Western.

This new presence is brought into the performance through the use of a different vocal style—also used later when the police arrive—one with a much higher tone and a faster pace. In the notation below, the symbol  indicates this high and fast direct speech. Before the actual event occurs, Western jokes about an imagined visit from the police, introducing the idea of such an interruption into the space of the dance.

Only his first few words are recited in the new vocal style suggesting direct speech:

 de said man said, ↗ 'any policeman come yah ↘ will get some righteous raas klaat licks, ↘ yea man, whole heap a kicks.' ↘" data-bbox="212 364 876 520"/>

The musical notation consists of three staves of bass clef notes. The lyrics are: "Street 66,"  de said man said, ↗ "any policeman come yah ↘ will get some righteous raas klaat licks, ↘ yea man, whole heap a kicks." ↘

After "Street 66," the poet returns to low frequencies in the rest of Western's sentence. Here again, this stylistic choice is not random. It obviously mirrors the low pattern of the bass. It also brings into Western's voice an attitude reflecting the confrontational dimension at the heart of this imagined visit, full of the destabilising forces of a dread riddim and low vibrations. The poet, as Western, moves into the deeper part of his tonal spectrum in order to find a sound that conveys the signs and the sines, the social connotations and the dread riddim, of bass culture. Interestingly, 'rass klaat', a typical colloquial expression of rasta talk, or dread talk, is pronounced slightly lower and slower, creating an even greater contrast with the tone and tempo of Western's first words. Pollard, in her analysis of dread talk, briefly mentions a preference for low tone as a common aspect of

this linguistic practice.<sup>437</sup> Although this comment is made only in passing, it supports the idea that here the poet makes a stylistic choice which conveys an intention: Western's voice is given a carefully articulated tone in order to indicate a specific attitude.

In the final stanza, the police's imagined visit becomes a real event. Here, the poet continues to introduce new characters with a fast pace and high tone. As already mentioned, this voice shows direct speech in the poetics of this poem. The switch between direct and indirect speech is made more obvious by the speed and high tone of "Who's dat?" and the slow delivery and low tone of 'asked Western feelin rite.' As opposed to the previous stanza, this one clearly marks the distinction between direct and indirect speech with a change of tone. Moreover, the conversational tone is made more evidently audible as it is anticipated by the previous line: 'bam bam bam a knockin pan the door', with the knock imitated by the bass and doubled by the voice with regular quavers in the first bar. This action is conveyed through words as well as sound.

The encounter between Western and the police happens at the doorstep of the blues dance. In their interaction, the voice becomes a nonverbal area of communication where tension between the oppressors and the oppressed is expressed: here the poet uses a voice slightly higher and faster than the one used to indicate direct speech. It is only in the final line that Western's voice resolves this tension, returning to low frequencies. Indeed, this deeper voice suggests a level of self-control in Western's comportment. After a moment of unstable

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<sup>437</sup> Pollard, p. 28.

confrontation when the voices of Western and the police went up the tonal spectrum, a deeper tone shows control over the situation. As mentioned above, this blues dance is an autonomous place within Babylon, an important space where people can express their cultural independence. In this area of self-affirmation, the low frequencies of reggae songs expelled from the large speakers of the sound system shape the confidence of the participants. Western's use of low vocal frequencies to say his final words, 'tek some licks', echoes this sense of assurance. As the poem ends with a voice that merges with the low pattern of the bass, it reaffirms the self-confidence of not only Western but also the entire crowd taking part in this blues dance. Indeed, sound systems not only provide entertainment: the loud sounds that come through their speakers also perform acts of 'registering and projecting a collective presence'.<sup>438</sup> The transcription below is a visualisation of the different tones in Western's voice and their relationship to the movements of the bass:

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<sup>438</sup> Wald, 'Soul Vibrations: Black Music and Black Freedom in Sound and Space', p. 675.

The musical score consists of five staves of bass clef music. The lyrics are integrated into the music, with some words appearing above the staff and others below. The lyrics include:

- hours beat de scene movin rite
- when all of a sudden ↗
- bam, bam, bam a knockin pan the door ↘
- "Who's dat?" ↙
- asked Western feelin rite. ↘
- "Open up! it's the police!" ↙
- Come on, open up!" ↙
- "What address do you want?" ↘
- "Number sixty-six!" ↙
- Come on, open up!" ↙
- Western feelin high replied: ↘
- "Yes, dis is Street 66" ↘
- step rite in an tek some licks." ↙

Blue numbers (3, 3, 3) are placed above certain notes in the music.

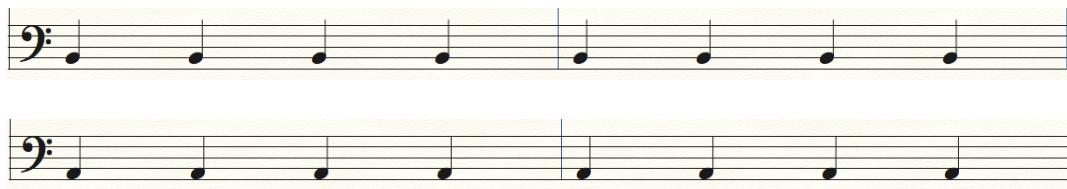
The conversation between Western and the police demonstrates how the poet meticulously switches between frequencies in his spoken voice. This is done to find a particular sound conveying intention and meaning. The movements of the bass, in dialogue with the voice, function as an artistic space where the poet shows his commitment to low frequencies. Throughout the poem, his spoken voice participates in creating a musical environment for the *Stimmung*, through not only the semantic surface of words but also the organisation of the performed poetics. A comparison of the studio version of this poem with a live version performed at the Capitol in Mannheim, Germany, in 1990 shows differences in the use of the voice.<sup>439</sup> I investigate these variations across time and contexts to further demonstrate a poetics of musicality born from the artistic search for a voice that

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<sup>439</sup> Band. Street 66. Germany. 6 February 1990. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4kDXAalMWc&list=PLa055pGH6QA5KBLaiujGq7dk4J8I60Wrp&index=20>> [18 April 2017]

behaves like a bass.

In the second version, the rather poor quality of the recording and the dense instrumentation cover the clarity of the bass. Yet it is still possible to hear the same movement between a high and a low pattern. Here the bass alternates between two bars on the note B and two bars on the note A, a much smaller interval than that of the studio version's bass line. Although the instrumental accompaniment is more complex than an oscillation between A and B, these two notes function as fundamental elements that structure the bass's melodic movement. Therefore, for the purpose of this discussion, I simply indicate the bass line with the alternation of these two notes:



Generally speaking, there is a much smaller range of tonal variation in the poet's voice throughout this version: the explorations of the expressive possibilities found in the different frequencies of the voice are somewhat restrained. This stylistic trait mirrors the small interval between the high and low patterns of the bass. This version also has a looser correlation between the movement of the bass and the movement of the voice: crisscrossing of patterns happens more often than in the studio version. Again, this is a result of a looser relationship between the voice and the bass. Yet a comparative analysis based on careful listening to these two versions reveals variations but also consistencies and convergences that testify to a continuous artistic concern with the sound of the voice. The influence of the bass can be clearly identified in stylistic choices in both.

In the live performance, the same tone of voice is used throughout the poem's first five lines. Despite the narrow range of tone variation, the declamatory style of these lines has a rhythm that evokes the rhythmic movement of the bass. A slightly higher tone follows in 'de soun woz muzik mellow steady flow', also corresponding to the movement of the bass. The voice returns to a lower tone in the stanza's last two lines. As the bass is less audible in this version, a reciprocal relationship between it and the voice is similarly less explored. These first few lines do not illustrate a doubling of the bass by the voice with a melodic and rhythmic mimesis, as is found in the studio version. Instead, the voice stays within a restrained range of tones. The difference between the high and the low patterns is only just distinguishable:

The musical notation consists of four staves of bass clef music. The lyrics are placed above or below the notes. The first staff contains 'de room woz dark-dusk howlin softly' and 'six-a-clack, ↘'. The second staff contains 'charcoal lite defyin site woz' and 'movin black; ↘'. The third staff contains 'de soun woz muzik mellow steady flow, ↗' and 'an man-son mind jus mystic red,'. The fourth staff contains 'green, red, green ... pure scene. ↘'.

Unlike in the studio version, 'pure scene' is recited with a low voice here, pronounced with the same tone as the rest of the line. This is a simplified organisation, where the recitation of 'pure scene' continues that of the preceding words. This choice corresponds to the tendency to use the vocal tone throughout this stanza. Yet despite this seemingly flattening of vocalic realisation, discreet movements up and down in the poet's voice hint at a desire to bring variations of tones into the performance.

The next stanza continues with this more or less similar tone throughout. In two lines, however, the poet distinctly moves between patterns: ‘shape that soun tumblin doun’, recited in a high tone, and ‘yea had to do an ride de rock’, recited in a low tone. A careful listening, however, reveals perceptible differences in other lines:

no man would dance but leap an shake ↗  
dat shock thru feelin ripe; ↘ shape dat sound tumblin doun ↗  
makin movement ruff enough; ↘ cause when ↗  
de muzik met I taps, ↗ I felt de sting, knew de shock, yea ↗  
had to do an ride de rock. ↘

The above passage shows more crisscrossing of patterns in the live performance than in the studio version of these lines. From ‘shape dat soun’ to ‘ride de rock’, the bass and the voice have almost only opposite patterns. In the studio version, however, only the third, fifth and seventh lines have crisscrossing patterns. Again, these different relationships between music and voice illustrate an artistic desire to bring a voice that sounds like a bass into the poetics. In this live version, however, this desire is not explored to its full potential, and the manifestations of innovative possibilities are limited.

This version’s introduction of characters is also worth a comment. In order to show the presence of direct speech, the vocal tone clearly shifts up, as in the studio version. Western’s words are pronounced with a high tone, in this musical context corresponding to the bass’s high pattern. Only in the expression ‘rass klaat

licks' does the voice slow down and move slightly into lower frequencies. As seen above, this is done to convey the dread in Western's attitude:

The image shows musical notation for the song "Street 66". It consists of two staves. The top staff is for the bass, indicated by a bass clef, and the bottom staff is for the voice, indicated by a soprano clef. The lyrics are written above the notes. The first line starts with "Street 66," followed by a blue speech bubble icon. The second line continues with "de said man said, ↗". The third line begins with "any policeman come yah ↘" and ends with "will get some righteous rass klaat licks, ↘". The fourth line starts with "yea man, whole heap a kicks." ↘. The music is in common time, with quarter notes.

Unlike in the studio version, here the high tone of direct speech is used throughout almost all the real interaction between Western and the police. There is not a lot of variation. Because of this monotone, voice and bass are often in contrast. Western's words 'Yes, dis is number 66', for instance, are recited in a high tone over the bass's low pattern. As we have seen, in the studio version these words are recited in a low tone, which there corresponds to the low pattern of the bass. It is only in the final part of Western's last sentence, 'an tek some licks', that a lower tone is used, to affirm the already discussed sense of self-confidence. The low vocal tone of the poem's conclusion not only mirrors but also emphasises the low frequencies of the bass.

Finally, in comparing these two performed versions and their commitment to the bass, tempo is an important aspect that should be discussed. Indeed, the choice of tempo impacts the presence of low frequencies in the voice. The studio version of the poem has a much slower tempo. It matches the 'mellow steady flow' of the music at the blues dance. It also allows the poet to play more carefully with enunciation. By using a slower pace, the poet gives himself room to manipulate his speaking voice and cautiously navigate between its tones. Moreover, the slow

tempo makes the poet's move into lower frequencies easier. Indeed, the wavelengths of low sounds are longer than those of everyday sounds. The term 'low-frequency' refers to such sounds with low fluctuation. Whereas low sounds usually fluctuate between 20 to 260 times per second, an everyday sound can fluctuate up to 16,000 times per second. In the studio performance, the slower tempo allows the poet to reach lower tones. Put another way, the lower tone of the poet's voice slows down the tempo of the entire performance. Conversely, as the live version is much faster, the poem is recited in higher frequencies. A faster tempo encourages high frequencies. The combination of a fast tempo with low frequencies is more difficult to achieve. Live performances of poems tend to be faster than studio versions. This might have to do with the very character of the event, where a crowd's attention must be caught and kept so that it stays entertained—much easier with a faster tempo. Moreover, in live performance, higher frequencies have a better sonic quality than lower frequencies. The choice of a higher tone, therefore, might be influenced by the need for a clear and audible voice in performing the text. The poet adapts his practice to the parameters of a live context. Thus, in an analysis of the voice and the bass, tempo is one more strategic tool offering creative possibilities for the exploration of a poetics of musicality. The aforementioned differences might easily be underestimated and considered insignificant. In a performative context, changes between versions can be interpreted as part of art's unfixed dimension.<sup>440</sup> Yet read through the lens of a poetics of musicality, these tempi and the behaviours of the voice in regard to

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<sup>440</sup> For instance, on a textual level, 'Open up!' does not appear after 'It's the police' in the studio version. Similarly, 'dis is Street 66' is changed to 'dis is number 66' in the live performance. Such differences do not necessarily require alternative interpretations.

the bass pattern are precious elements of analysis. They deepen the reader's sensitivity to music's impact on some areas of aesthetic choice. They offer a space to think critically about the poet's commitment to music, and more particularly, to the low frequencies of bass culture.

# Chapter 6: A performance-driven aesthetic

## Theatricality

It is undeniable that the place of theatre in the practice of dub poetry remains underanalysed. The crucial importance of theatre needs to be seriously analysed in order to shed new light on certain aspects of dub poetry, such as the influence of performance on poetic choices. The majority of the poets have theatrical training and have experimented with staging texts. Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, Oku Onuora, Mutabaruka and Michael Smith studied at the Jamaican School of Drama. Their training helped them to develop a style of performance that is highly expressive. Similarly, although LKJ was not directly involved with the Jamaican School of Drama, his first publication was a play: *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974) starts with a note telling the stage director that the work must be accompanied by drums, bass guitar and flute. From the very first page, the play hints at artistic dialogue between literature, music, and theatre. In the artistic practice of many dub poets, the audience can hear the echoes of a theatrical tradition.<sup>441</sup> Dub poetry also emerged in the artistic scene of the Caribbean Artists Movement, where evenings of poetry reading had a ‘good deal of playwriting and acting’ exploring the development of new forms such as ‘reggae plays’.<sup>442</sup> With the

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<sup>441</sup> See, for instance, Archie Pool. R.A.P.P. – Wicked City. Y Records - Y 30. 1982 [LP] <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDjF0NZ67og>> [June 2018]. This album is an interesting mix of dub poetry and dramatic recitation. It was produced by Dennis Bovell and is the work of the actor and dub poet Archie Pool. This example illustrates a crossover between theatre and poetry.

<sup>442</sup> Brathwaite, Ramchand, and Salkey ed., *Special Issue*, p. 10. In 2017, the artist d’bi.young anitafrika debuted, in Toronto, her *Lukumi: A Dub Opera*. She defines this work

close reading of Michael Smith's 'Trainer', this chapter argues that both the text and the performance of this text display artistic characteristics that suggest a theatre background. In looking at a theatrical influence on both the text and the performance of the text, this chapter analyses the performance of the poem 'as not just a carrier of a pre-defined artistic content but as a shaper of that content'.<sup>443</sup> In other words, I argue that the poet's awareness that the poem can be performed creates artistic possibilities on the level of poetics for acting out the text.

Amongst the dub poets' performative styles, Smith's is one of the most highly evocative of a theatrical influence.<sup>444</sup> A poem such as the emblematic 'Mi C-Yaan Believe It' is a significant illustration of theatrical influence. Yet in order to continue expanding academic knowledge of dub poetry, I analyse his less-known poem 'Trainer'. More precisely, I discuss the multiple voices of the characters that people the narrative structure to identify the presence of a theatrical practice in both the print version and the performed version. The text is from the back cover

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as a continuation of the artistic dialogue between dub poetry and theatre started by her mother, Anita Stewart, a graduate of the Jamaica School of Drama. As d'bi.young anitafrika has mentioned, in 1985, Stewart wrote a thesis, 'Dubbin Theatre: Moving Dub Poetry into a Theatrical Form', in which she identifies some principles of dub poetry and argues that they can be transferred to the theatre (Amanda Parris, 'Everything you Ever Wanted to Know about Dub'. CBC Arts. 2017. Web site. Available at <<https://www.cbc.ca/arts/everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-dub-1.4302425>> [11 June 2019]. This case highlights a strong relationship between theatre and dub poetry, as this chapter argues for.

<sup>443</sup> Novak, p. 56. This quote is part of a discussion of Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Die Zeichensprache des Theaters: Zum Problem Theatralischer Bedeutungsgenerierung', in *Theaterwissenschaft Heute: Eine Einführung*, ed. Renate Möhrmann (Berlin: Reimer, 1990), pp. 233-260 (p. 251).

<sup>444</sup> It is not a coincidence that Brathwaite, in his seminal text *History of the Voice*, uses Derek Walcott's and Smith's poetry to illustrate his theoretical discussion of the voice. In his reference to Smith, he notes not only how the written text translates the voice of the people, the locals, but also how it is carefully manipulated with technique and breath. In so doing, he points to the audible dimension of the voice as a poetic resource used as a space of analysis (Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, pp. 45-46).

of Smith's LP *Mi C-Yaan Believe It*. The audio version is the studio recording found on this same LP, which is accompanied by music.<sup>445</sup> These two versions are the only ones available today.<sup>446</sup> I argue that the text of the poem offers a multiplicity of voices that allows the poet to dramatise the content by slipping into the skins of its different characters during the performance. With his training at the Jamaican School of Drama, Smith could carefully craft his passage from the written text to the performance of this written text. In the following paragraphs, I argue that there is a theatrical presence not just in the highly performative style of the performance but also in the writing of the poem. The conception of the text, therefore, includes an exploration of the possibilities for the poem to be acted out. Dub poetry has a performance-driven aesthetic in the conceptualisation of the texts. This performance-driven aesthetic is referred to by the term 'theatricality'. It is found in the narrative structure of the text, as well as in the 'words in audible motion' of the performance.

This performance-driven aesthetic is not an isolated phenomenon. It is not specific to dub poetry and can be understood within a wider artistic context where literature criss-crosses with other performative art forms.<sup>447</sup> Carol Bailey's *A Poetics of Performance* offers an analysis of the role and place of performance in contemporary Caribbean prose. The book discusses the integration of songs,

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<sup>445</sup> Michael Smith. *Mi C-Yaan Believe It*. Island Records. 1982 [CD].

<sup>446</sup> LKJ comments that 'Trainer' is the only track with original backing music. The backing tracks of the other poems on the album are mostly other people's music (Beaumont, 'Black Power, People's Power: A Conversation With Linton Kwesi Johnson'. 29 March 2011. Blog. Available at <<http://dopefolksrecords.blogspot.com/2011/03/conversation-with-linton-kwesi-johnson.html>> [16 January 2019]).

<sup>447</sup> Talking about Louise Bennett, Rohlehr notes that her poetry 'depends so much on tones of voice, on the fluidity of the voice [...] that one ought to comment on the words in audible motion, rather than in their comparatively frozen form on the page' (quoted in Bailey, p. 181). I respond to his call in my study of dub poetry.

idiomatic expressions, prayers, proverbs and other oral forms to interrogate written fiction and its relationship to performance. The author coins this performance-driven aesthetic in a number of Caribbean novels ‘performing poetics’. Her discussion encompasses a larger historical context, in which ‘Caribbean people have used a variety of performance styles as vehicles for self-expression and resistance’.<sup>448</sup> In the practice of dub poetry, the delivery mode of performance can similarly be understood within this larger historical context. Performance can be seen as a tool of resistance that critically challenges imposed ideologies and stylistic norms. Dub poets ‘enter and continue a tradition in which various forms of performance have been the bedrock of survival in the struggles for freedom and personhood in the colonial and postcolonial contexts of the Caribbean’.<sup>449</sup> Yet, while keeping this historical trajectory in mind, this chapter stays focused on an analysis of the theatricality of performance. A critical understanding of the artistic relationship between theatre and poetry requires the introduction, as well as the clarification, of some technical terms.

There are various ways of understanding the shared artistic space of poetry and theatre. Julia Novak, in her guide to live poetry, explains:

As live poetry generally does not make use of props or elaborate stage scenery, it could perhaps most easily be classified as “Poor Theatre” as defined by Jerzy

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<sup>448</sup> Bailey, p. 7. In performance studies, there is a broad conversation among scholars about the relationship between performance and resistance. See, for instance, Marvin Carlson: ‘the body in performance provides not only alternative ways of knowing but a subversion of the dominant symbolic order’ (Carlson, *Performance*, p. 169).

<sup>449</sup> Bailey, p. 14.

Grotowski [...] It is this element of “liveness”, of being in the moment, that is most evidently shared by the two art forms.<sup>450</sup>

Novak’s understanding of a dialogue between these two art forms is based on the live dimension of their performance. In this close reading, however, the analysis is not based on the liveness of their respective performances, as I situate the echoes of a theatrical practice—in other words, the development of a performance-driven aesthetic—in both the written text and the recording of the written text. As this performance is studio recorded, the theatrical influence is situated outside the liveness of the event. It is within the piece of art itself. In order to mark the nature of the performance discussed in this close reading, I use the term ‘audiotext’.<sup>451</sup> It refers to the audio version of the written text. It is studio-recorded. In addition, because this recording is audio only, its theatricality is heard rather than seen. Moreover, it is important to clarify that my understanding of a theatrical influence in dub poetry does not argue for a hybrid poetics, such as the one found in Bailey’s ‘performing poetics’. Theatre and poetry do not merge to create a poetic expression at the crossing of these two distinctive art forms. The close reading does not dissolve the boundaries between poetry and theatre. Nor do I propose an analysis of the written poem as a dramatic script or the text of a play.

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<sup>450</sup> Novak, p. 56. Poor theatre is characterised by the elimination of anything superfluous: ‘theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc...’ (Novak, p. 56). See pp. 56-61 for more parallels and distinctions between theatre and live poetry.

<sup>451</sup> This term is used by Charles Bernstein and is inspired by Genette’s concept of paratext. Bernstein defines ‘audiotext’ as ‘the poet’s acoustic performance’ (Bernstein Charles ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 13), in contrast to the ‘evoked aurality often referred to in discussions of the “inherent” sound of the written word’ (Novak, p. 75). Simply speaking, an audiotext is a text converted into an audio version. I use the recording of this audio version as the performed version of the written poem.

From their distinctive contexts of realisation, these two versions of the same poem show different methods of artistic involvement with theatre. In both, however, the poet explores the possibilities for the poem's being acted out. They are illustrative of a space where the poet displays his dramatic skills. It is where the theatricality of the poem unfolds. Here again, clarification about the term 'theatricality' is necessary. In this context, it refers to some specific codes influenced by theatrical practice. These codes are not fixed and can vary across academic discussions. As Roland Barthes writes, 'What is theatricality? It is theatre-minus-text, it is a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument'.<sup>452</sup> It is therefore important to adapt the codes by which the term can be defined to the specificities of the following analysis. The first lines of the book *Theatricality* highlight the wide range of meanings that the word encompasses:

Depending upon one's perspective, it can be dismissed as little more than a self-referential gesture or it can be embraced as a definitive feature of human communication. Although it obviously derives its meanings from the worlds of theatre, *theatricality* can be abstracted from the theatre itself and then applied to any and all aspects of human life. Even if limited to theatre, its potential meanings are daunting. Thus, it can be defined exclusively as a specific type of performance style or inclusively as all the semiotic codes of theatrical representation.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 26.

<sup>453</sup> Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, 'Theatricality: An Introduction', in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-40 (p. 1).

In *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Marvin Carlson also notes this complexity:

With performance as a kind of critical wedge, the metaphor of theatricality has moved out of the arts into almost every aspect of modern attempts to understand our conditions and activities, into almost every branch of the human sciences – sociology, anthropology, ethnography, psychology, linguistics. And as performativity and theatricality have been developed in these fields, both as metaphors and as analytical tools, theorists and practitioners of performance art have in turn become aware of these developments and found in them new sources of stimulation, inspiration, and insight for their own creative work and the theoretical understanding of it.<sup>454</sup>

Both quotes illustrate how the word ‘theatricality’ raises a set of issues that point to its multi-layered interpretation. Moreover, both authors present an understanding of theatricality that is not empiric. Indeed, the term cannot be defined by qualitative properties, as it is not delimited by fixed categories. An understanding of theatricality can be reinvented depending on the historical time and the context of the discussion.<sup>455</sup> Despite such flexibility, the word ‘theatricality’ evokes some specific characteristics.<sup>456</sup> ‘Theatricality’ evokes certain actions drawn from theatrical practice, such as ‘acting, play acting, playing up to, putting on an act, putting on a performance, making a scene, making a spectacle’.<sup>457</sup> Rather than proposing a single definition, which would ignore the

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<sup>454</sup> Carlson, *Performance*, p. 6.

<sup>455</sup> Davis and Postlewait’s *Theatricality* discusses how different historical contexts generate different interpretations of the word.

<sup>456</sup> Davis and Postlewait, ‘Theatricality: An Introduction’, p. 27.

<sup>457</sup> Davis and Postlewait, ‘Theatricality: An Introduction’, p. 5, quoting Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 1.

impossible task of placing the term within certain categories without contradicting others, I use ‘theatricality’ to refer to a set of features employed to explore the possibilities of acting out a poem, of dramatising it. This analysis identifies aesthetic choices influenced by the poet’s theatrical practice that bring additional layers of expressivity into that practice. I have already mentioned that the recognition of such artistic choices is not exclusively situated in the performance itself.<sup>458</sup> A discussion of theatricality includes the writing process as well. Indeed, as will be demonstrated, the text of the dub poem carries a pre-analytical perception of the performance. Each version of the poem illustrates specific characteristics of its theatrical dialogue. While moving between the text and the audiotext, I use the notion of the voice to connect these versions to the concept of theatricality. I argue that the voice is a creative space where the influence of theatre can be identified. Here again, because of the multifaceted dimensions brought by the notion of the voice, some preliminary comments need to be made in order to adjust the term to the purposes of this discussion.

### **The voice**

I argue that paralinguistic features such as the tone of voice, its fluidity, pauses and breath are important elements of the theatrical dimension of a poet’s practice. These nonverbal elements are instruments at the disposal of the poet to give an expressive delivery of the written poem. I will refer to these paralinguistic

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<sup>458</sup> It is often assumed that the substantial meanings and import of a play are in the performance. A dub poem is not constituted as a performance piece.

elements as ‘articulatory parameters’.<sup>459</sup> The use of graphic waveforms to visualise variations in these articulatory parameters would have been particularly useful. Indeed, verbal descriptions of these elements can be rather subjective and can be interpreted in many ways. Waveforms, however, offer a more objective, visual representation of pauses, volume, speed and degree of fluidity in the poet’s voice. Yet for this case study, graphic waveforms cannot be used to map the voice, as it is backed by a musical accompaniment. The voice cannot be separated from the music. Waveforms are best suited to representing an a cappella poem. I will therefore use verbal descriptions to discuss the voice and the variations of its articulatory parameters, which are used in combination. The poet uses them in a multilayered way in order to achieve the full expressivity of his voice. The voice does not display only one element of these paralinguistic features. With them, the poet uses the multivocality of the written text to act out the characters in the performed version. As mentioned above, this performed version is the studio recording.

Understood in either a literal or a metaphorical way, the voice of a performance or a printed text can be analysed. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* attempt to define ‘voice’ uses the ambiguity between its oral and written contexts as an important element: ‘To define *voice* in written poetry immediately poses a problem, for there is no literal voice in the poem: voice is an oral metaphor

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<sup>459</sup> ‘Articulatory parameters’ is a term proposed by Van Leeuwen (Theo Van Leeuwen, *Speech, Music, Sound* (Hounds Mills: Macmillan, 1999), p. 9). It emphasises the articulatory aspect of the use of nonverbal elements. The combination of these elements has an expressive result.

employed in the description and analysis of the written word.<sup>460</sup> ‘Voice’ can be used in both contexts but needs to be carefully adapted in order to fit the purpose of the analysis. To mark the different contexts, and following Lesley Wheeler in *Voicing American Poetry*, I use the terms ‘textual voice’ and ‘voiced text’.<sup>461</sup> In this analysis, the term ‘textual voice’, used more correctly in its plural form, refers to the voices of the characters found in the written text. I argue that these textual voices bring into the poetics a multivocality that foregrounds the poem’s performative context. These textual voices offer the poet the possibility to slip into the skins of the different characters. Textual voices prepare the poem to be ‘acted out’. By introducing these textual voices in the writing of the poem, Smith creates a dialogic dimension in which theatricality unfolds. ‘Voiced text’, on the other hand, is used to talk about the poet’s voice heard in the audiotext. It refers to the words in audible motion. It is used to discuss ‘poems recited, read aloud, performed by authors, actors, students, and others’.<sup>462</sup> It is used to talk about a poem that, although having been composed in print, is performed orally and received aurally. The voiced text is the vocal realisation of the text. In this case study, the text is voiced by the poet. The poet is the performer, and the voiced text is the poet’s voice heard in audiotext. An analysis of this voiced text, therefore, is an analysis of the poet’s recorded voice. In my discussion of theatricality, there is no priority of textual voices over voiced text, or voiced text over textual voices. Both versions have equal authority in their demonstration of

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<sup>460</sup> Roland Greene and Stephen Cushman ed., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 1525.

<sup>461</sup> Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 2.

<sup>462</sup> Wheeler, p. 2.

theatricality. There are minor differences of words between the recorded and the print versions, suggesting a certain flexibility between the poem on the page and the poem-in-performance. These discrepancies between the two versions also challenge the common presumption of the status of performance as simply a recitation of the written text. Going against this hierarchy where the text is primary and the recitation of the text is secondary, discrepancies are there to remind us to think of a dub poem through a multiplicity of versions. They are versions of the same poem rather than perfect reflections of each other.

The word ‘voice’ is also commonly used to refer to ‘originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence’.<sup>463</sup> In this close reading, ‘voice’ is not used to discuss the poet’s originality and personality. It is, nonetheless, understood as an element that indeed brings the illusion of different presences. This illusion is analysed as a key characteristic of theatricality, with which the poet shows his dramatic skills. Moreover, discussions of the voice in literature very often raise political questions. It is commonly seen as ‘an instrument of struggle’, and ‘in terms of narrative, the recovery of voice becomes one way through which unspoken and repressed experiences can be represented.’<sup>464</sup> In literary studies, this is a common interpretation of the notion of the voice. It is a centrepiece of postcolonial discourse and is often used as an analytical space where critics discuss ‘reclaiming marginalized cultural practices that have nonetheless stubbornly persisted and thrived’.<sup>465</sup> The voice is the place for cultural affirmation

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<sup>463</sup> Wheeler, p. 3.

<sup>464</sup> Bailey, p. 175.

<sup>465</sup> Bailey, p. 175.

transmitting the idea of liberation and the ‘authentic self’.<sup>466</sup> Generally speaking, it is well known that history is dictated by the voices of the ‘winners’. The ‘losers’, on the other hand, have their voices marginalised and made silent. Although such a dichotomy is far too simple, the recuperation of one’s voice in a situation of unbalanced power is seen as a political act of emancipation.

Without ignoring these implications, the following paragraphs use the notion of the voice in an analysis of theatricality. The voice becomes the main analytical tool in discussing the characters that constitute the poem. It is a useful tool that allows me to move between versions while focusing on a similar element. Mervyn Morris’ definition of a performance poem as a poem constituting ‘voices that insist on being sounded’ is particularly significant for this chapter.<sup>467</sup> For him, and for me, the voice is a crucial aspect of poetry, in which the performance-driven aesthetic can be analysed, theorised and identified.

In addition to being an illustration of theatricality, the multiplicity of the characters’ voices is a useful tool to add a collective dimension to the poem. The individual voice of the single narrator, a particular person, is complemented by the polyvocality introduced by the characters. This is particularly significant in a poetic tradition that values collectivity.<sup>468</sup> It is an important aspect of not only its artistic

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<sup>466</sup> Brathwaite’s *History of the Voice* provides good examples where the voice combines artistic expression and the liberation of an unheard self.

<sup>467</sup> Morris, p. 45.

<sup>468</sup> In the artistic contexts of the black Atlantic, the communal aspect of art, and poetry more specifically, can be found across a variety of traditions. In defining the Black Arts Movement, for instance, Amiri Baraka writes: ‘I would like to . . . say that my conception of art, black art, is that it has to be collective [...]. When I say collective, that it comes from the collective experience of black people’ (Olaniyan, pp. 22-23). Baraka’s original words are from a 1969 synopsis, quoted in Abiodun Jeyifous, ‘Black Critics on Black Theatre in America: An Introduction’, *The Drama Review: TDR*, 18 (1974), pp. 34-45 (p. 41) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1144922>> [12 February 2018]). Dub poetry similarly responds to this appeal to the collective dimension in the experience of black people.

but also its political mode of expression. Indeed, in dub poetry, the individual voice of the narrator is very often speaking from a larger collectivity. There are many examples where the content of the poem carries the message of a community that is nonetheless conveyed through an individual mode of narration. ‘Trainer’ is particularly personal. At first sight, there is no attempt to include a communal ‘we’ in the narration. The scenes described are all closely related to the narrator’s life and experience. The whole chain of events is seen through the narrator’s eyes. Yet despite the use of the singular pronoun ‘I’ throughout the poem, the individual dimension of the act of enunciation is complemented by the multivocality of the text. These voices, the result of the coexistence of different characters, add a co-presence to the individual narrative mode of the poem. The different encounters on which the narration of the poem is constructed are accompanied by dialogues. They generate a polyphony with which the poet can construct a story that not only represents the specificities of his personal life but also carries the voices and the presence of a larger collectivity which goes beyond the focus on a single narrator. Through these encounters, the poet creates a plurality of experiences, of ideologies, of consciousnesses.<sup>469</sup> As will be further discussed below, these voices do not represent a unified community. They do not speak from a shared life experience. These encounters are acts of unjustified violence in which the voices of the characters are constantly in conflict. In their co-presence, they illustrate oppositions rather than unity. These conflicting voices mirror the fragmentation of a society that is plural, contradictory, and discordant. They illustrate the reality

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<sup>469</sup> Vettorato, p. 505.

of social contrast and its consequences on human interactions. In the poem, the voices of the characters are a window on the lack of solidarity between human beings. Within the poem, there is ambiguity around the criteria by which this society is divided. Divisions can happen internally as well as externally: they can operate within a community, but also across communities. Despite this ambiguity, the focus of the poem is on the antagonistic dimension of these discursive voices.

### **'Trainer'**

'Trainer' is an autobiographical poem. It is a window on the madness of surviving in an urban jungle. There is a sense of topicality in the description of the events that is conveyed through the use of the present tense. The poem is built on a succession of scenes taken from the streets. They are narrated by a dispossessed young man, who feels fed up with his life and who wanders through the night. The poem is peopled with a number of characters with whom he has random encounters. Each of these events illustrates the excess of violence found in every corner of this urban jungle. The young narrator's observations have a teaching function. They denounce unjustified acts of violence happening in everyday life. The young man's eyes function as reality check. It is during the night, when everybody is sleeping, that such reality becomes flagrant. His observations take the form of a long confession. The drifting persona wandering the streets, observing and facing a rough reality, is a characteristic trait of Michael Smith's poetics, and of dub poetry more generally.<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> The already mentioned poem 'Mi C-Yaan Believe It' is also a window onto the madness of the city's slums. The poem is structured around a single narrator's observations. Similarly, many of LKJ's poems are narrated by a wanderer who witnesses events

The print version of the poem appears on the back cover of the album *Mi C-Yaan Believe It*. It is the only written version available and is a precious help for an audience unfamiliar with Smith's Jamaican pronunciation. Keeping his Jamaican pronunciation in the spelling of words, this written poem guides the audience in the reception of the recorded version. However, the text does not provide any clues about how it is or should be performed. The layout is limited, if not dictated, by the space on the back cover of the album. In this restricted space, the layout is familiar-looking throughout the poem. It uses left-justified columns. Punctuation is limited to the use of only suspension points. There is only one change of font. 'YUH' is randomly written in capital letters once. This is an exception, as all the other appearances of the word 'yuh' are standardly written in lowercase. Similarly, while every line starts with a capital letter, the last one, which comprises only one word, is written in lowercase: 'walk'. Such unexpected changes between high and low also happen within the lines:

So a jus walk an hold mi ead  
In de air ... A Nah tell yuh  
[...]  
A goen help yuh Fi reach home

As to the size of the poetic lines, they are irregular. The poem alternates between long and short lines without suggesting a particular reading. From the very first lines, the reader is confronted with this rather random alternation between long

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happening in the streets. The figure of the wanderer, of course, has its forerunners in the British literary tradition. The narrator of William Blake's famous poem "London" (1793), for instance, is a good example of a wanderer, walking the streets of the city and observing the omnipresence of hardship and desperation. The parallel is already made explicit in Habekost's early study (Habekost, p. 127). The wanderer is a common figure in poetry (see, for instance, Walter Benjamin's famous figure of the *flâneur*, inspired by Baudelaire).

and short lines:

Yuh think a little things  
Mi guh through trainer  
Mi use to live ina one  
Little yard  
Which part everybody  
Think dem better off than de other  
An de only thing mi could a do  
Fi mek dem know dat mi nah  
Skin up

Above, the line breaks are rather unexpected. The break between lines 6 and 7 corresponds to the grammatical organisation of the passage: ‘Think dem better off than de other’ and ‘An de only thing mi could a do’ can be read independently without losing any semantic coherence. This is similarly true for the break between lines 7 and 8. These are predictable breaks that do not disturb the grammatical organisation of the passage or its semantic meaning. However, the break between the third and fourth lines, for instance, is unexpected and cannot be justified by semantics or grammar. Indeed, ‘ina one’ and ‘little yard’ are two phrases that make sense only when they complement each other. ‘Ina one’ and ‘little yard’ are part of the same semantic unit. The placement of a break after ‘ina one’ is at odds with an expected organisation. Such clashes between the layout and the internal organisation of the poetic line occur throughout the entire passage. The expected phrasing of these few lines is in contradiction to the organisation suggested by the layout. As I said, breaks in the text often do not follow an expected organisation. The written version does not mirror the vocalisation of the text. It is not a transcription of the words in motion, the audiotext. Only the phonetic spelling used throughout the poem suggests a particular realisation of the voiced text. Even without hearing the audiotext, the reader can use the spelling to imagine an

oral realisation of the poem. This written version expresses the poet's choice to use a Jamaican pronunciation. Yet as stated above, this version does not provide any clues on how to perform the text. There is no other information that would guide the reader to imagine a performance. The text does not function like a script, which the reader can use to think of the dramatisation of the content in a performative context. The text nonetheless carries key elements in which dub poetry's theatricality can be identified and analysed. I will first look at the narrative structure and see how it creates a series of opportunities for the poet to act out the poem.

As already mentioned, theatricality can be situated in the conceptualisation of the text itself. Here it is connected to the writing process and, more precisely, to the dialogic dimension of the narration. The poem opens with a short account of the narrator's life. From the first few lines, the reader understands that this young man is addressing his observations and the description of his walk to an implied friend. Referring to this person as 'Trainer', probably a friendly form of address like 'mate', the young man explains:<sup>471</sup>

Yuh think a little things  
Mi guh through trainer  
[...]  
YUH Know what wake mi up Trainer?  
[...]  
For yuh know how a did feel Trainer

We learn that the narrator lives in a shared yard, where everybody feels better off than the others. Because he refuses to get dragged into a foolish fight with the other people living there, he goes out for a walk. In order to calm down, he

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<sup>471</sup> 'Trainer' is sometimes capitalised and sometimes spelt with a lowercase 't'. Here again, this discrepancy seems to have no reason.

wanders through the night:

When de area ready fi erupt  
Is de mek dem know dat mi is a man  
Dat will bun up hard and tear off

In his walk, he is unable to find a safe place to rest. The shared yard that he left behind is presented as an unsafe home. It is not a friendly place where he can find some comfort. Moving alone in the street, the reader understands, he is experiencing social exclusion. He has not done anything wrong, yet because of his economic situation he is unable to find a home and some food. The previous three days have left him sleep deprived. He is also hungry. Food and shelter, usually seen as basic necessities, are hard to find for him. When he gets some food, he feels grateful:

A three day mi nuh sleep  
An God bless whe mi eat

As he moves around through the night, the people that he encounters bring a series of unjustified beatings and insults into the narration. He first sees a man whom he knows as an 'old murderer'. There is no interaction between the two. The young man simply notices his presence on the corner of the street, then continues his walk and ends up in a dance. When the dance finishes, he impulsively decides to take a bus. At this late hour of the night, buses have stopped running. He therefore considers taking a taxi, but he has no money for a ride. Moreover, being homeless, he does not have an address to give to the driver:

A never have nuh taxi fare  
Plus a never did live anywhere

Without any goals, he continues his walk, with his 'ead in de air'. There is a sense of spontaneity in this night drifting. The succession of events, from the end of the

dance to the realisation that the bus has stopped running, combined with the absence of a fixed address, brings into this walk a sense of unplanned and improvised journey. In the written text, suspension points are visual markers that emphasise this sense of spontaneity and improvisation:

But last bus stop ...  
[...]  
So a jus walk an hold mi ead  
In de air... A Nah tell yuh

After leaving the dance, he reaches a square. There he hears a conversation between a man and a teenager. It is the first time that an exchange of words enters the narrative structure of the poem through direct speech. This incorporation of conversation alters the descriptive mode used up to now. Words heard on the street are dragged into the narrative structure. The interaction between the teenager and the elder man explicitly brings the poem into the oral milieu in which the poem takes place. From a visual point of view, there is no sign of this shift in the narrative style. Indeed, there is no punctuation to indicate direct speech or to mark the difference between the voice of the poet and those of these external characters. The text does not visually introduce these new textual voices:

A man laugh an sey  
Kiss me ass  
A goen help yuh Fi reach home  
Before it dark  
[...]  
Mi... a ... fourteen sah

This episode between the teenager and the older man is the first incident in which physical violence is described. Based on the old man's subjective judgment that it is too late at night for the teenager to be out, he furiously beats the boy. His reaction is disproportionate, and, in his burst of violence, he loses all social

manners:

An im grab one  
Little bwoy ina  
Im waist  
[...]  
An de man dash on de  
Cata-nine a an de bwoy

There is no reference to any wrongdoing that could perhaps justify the man's overreaction. The contrast of age between these two characters intensifies a feeling that the beating is unfair. The narrator witnesses the event without interfering. He continues his walk until he reaches the public house where he can finally get some rest. He feels extremely weak, but his well-deserved sleep is interrupted in the early morning by a man, most probably a cleaner, pouring a bucket full of disinfectant on him. The cleaner's use of 'jase water', a strong bleach employed to decontaminate areas infected by cockroaches, mice or lice, shows how the young wanderer is treated like the filth of the street.<sup>472</sup> This second encounter adds another layer of unjustified and arbitrary violence, found in every corner of this urban jungle. In this incident, there is no place for apology. The cleaner does not say a word of excuse, and the entire episode is presented as a deliberate act:

Im must did know is a human sit sown deh  
A ketch a nap yet im dash a bucket a jase water  
Pon mi without saying sorry at dat

The narrator does not physically react to this unjustified treatment. He only

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<sup>472</sup> 'Jase' is probably the phonetic spelling for 'Jeyes'. According to Cassidy and LePage's *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, 'Jeyes' is an abbreviation of 'Jeyes' fluid', 'a common household disinfectant, also used in home remedies' (Frederic Gomes Cassidy and Robert Brock LePage ed., *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 246).

interiorises the humiliation and moves away. As at the beginning of the poem, he walks away in order to calm down. Here again, there is no conversation between the narrator and the other man. Their interaction comes from the cleaner's action of pouring bleaching on the narrator. Yet despite the absence of vocal exchange, this episode brings into the narrative structure two additional voices, those of an imaginary angel and an imaginary devil. This encounter, without giving a voice to the cleaner, is nonetheless used as another occasion to complement with additional voices the single perspective of the narrator's individual mode of narration. This episode introduces multiple voices that the poet might use to show his dramatic skill in a performative context. This will be further discussed in the second part of the close reading. For now, it is enough to notice the contribution of this element of the narrative structure to a pre-analytical perception of the text in performance.

In the next and final encounter, the narrator continues to be treated like dirt. After he finds a new place to rest, a second cleaner orders him to leave. Just like the filth of the street, he needs to be 'removed'. This time, the cleaner's voice is introduced in the narration:

Sametime a man come on deh  
An sey  
Get up  
Yuh dutty up

Here again, there is no visual sign to indicate direct speech. There is only the line break between the second and third lines to suggest a change of voice. The narrator strongly wants to react, but he cannot find anything to say. The accumulation of events and violent acts throughout the night leaves him

speechless:

For it was de fus time  
Im mi life a really feel  
Fi sey something an could  
Not bring out nothing

Faced with his inability to ‘sey something’, the young man ends the poem by once again turning his back on the situation and walking away:

so... a... jus... a jus...  
walk

Throughout the poem, his absence of words, coming from either extreme exhaustion or deliberate muteness, mirrors the silence and the indifference of the other people living in the madness of this concrete jungle. Mistreatment happens in every corner of the streets and affects even people who have not committed any crime. Despite the omnipresence of this violence, no one seems to care. None of the above injustices have been stopped by people passing by.

The poem ends in the early morning. This brings a sense of circularity to the narration. After this succession of events, the night ends and leaves space for the next day to come. This progression of night and day creates a feeling of continuity in this madness. Indeed, the next day will be punctuated by another series of beatings and mistreatments. It is a continuation of the night that has just ended. The natural succession of day-night-day, as well as the narrator’s continued random drift after the final encounter, creates a narrative temporality that is not resolved. Suspension points are also used to suggest this sensation of endlessness in the poem. Moreover, the organisation of words on the page in these final lines similarly hints at continuous temporality. Visual space between ‘so’, ‘a’, and ‘jus’ adds to the interpretation of the text a sense of extended time that mirrors the

narrator's *flânerie*. Indeed, the reader pauses between the words to imitate the visual space, and in so doing adds some extra time to the reading. This is the only place where the layout suggests a particular vocalisation of the text and simultaneously responds to the content of the passage. With these visual blanks between words, the reader can anticipate a specific voiced text in which the voice carefully crafts the illusion of the narrator's drift.

### The audiotext

The above description of the narrative structure discussed the introduction of different voices as an important characteristic of the poem. It is through this polyvocality that the poet adds a theatrical dimension to the written text. In order to understand these textual voices as elements of theatricality, I now move to the audiotext to see how they offer the opportunity to dramatise the poem. The polyvocality of the narrative structure allows for a vocal realisation in which the poet can display his dramatic skills. As I move from the page to the recording, I adapt the analysis of theatricality by paying attention to the words in audible motion. I use paralinguistic features of the recorded voice to explore the poet's expressive style. 'Rate, length, pause duration, pitch contour, tone of voice, loudness, and stress' are all elements of the recorded voice where a theatrical influence can be identified.<sup>473</sup> It is important to note that paralinguistic features 'can be manipulated to achieve an infinite variety of emotional, attitudinal, and stylistic effects', and that, therefore, their interpretations are not fixed.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1977), p. 20.

<sup>474</sup> Novak, p. 77.

Moreover, interpretations of these articulatory parameters are content based. They need to be connected to the poetic discourse in which they appear and are often used in conjunction with one another. The poet fully expresses his or her skills by combining these nonverbal elements. As Novak notes, ‘Certain qualities of an audiotext can be identified and labelled with relative ease but often cannot be defined with reference to one articulatory parameter only, as they are a conglomerate of features contributing towards a perceptible overall effect’.<sup>475</sup>

In the audiotext, the poet presents the succession of events with a vocal drama added over the poetic language. As opposed to a theatre play, here the dramatisation of the text happens in a musical context. The manipulation of the articulatory parameters sometimes supplements and sometimes opposes the music played with the voiced text. The music has two sections: A and B. The first part, A, uses the chord progression A minor / A minor / D minor / E minor.<sup>476</sup> Played over four bars, this motif is the harmonic structure for the poem’s first part. The poem starts with an introduction of four bars of this motif A, played as the first two lines of the recited text. There the narrator addresses the poem to his mate ‘Trainer’. After this introduction, the music continues with this harmonic structure over sixteen bars. The second motif, B, arrives with ‘For I did fell fed up’. It is six bars and has the following chord progression:

D-/D-/D-/D- | A-/ A-/ A-/ A- | D-/D- /D-/D- | A-/ A-/ A-/ A- | F/F/E-/E- | F/F/E7/E7

The poem uses a conventional alternation between these two motifs: ABA. The music is played in a regular metre of common time, 4/4. From the very first lines,

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<sup>475</sup> Novak, p. 132.

<sup>476</sup> To indicate a minor chord, I will use the writing convention found in jazz: A minor, for instance, is A-, while A major is A.

the listener is surprised by the contrast between the flexibility of the poet's voice and the music's regular metre. The voice sometime speeds up and sometimes slows down. Pauses are included to create expressive effects in the vocalisation of the text. As opposed to an expected organisation, with each poetic line corresponding to a musical bar, this audiotext illustrates a situation of more than one line recited over a single bar. Below is a visualisation of the voiced text of the first few lines in their musical context. It is followed by the written version found on the back cover of the recording in order to see the differences:

A- / A- / D- / E-  
Mi use to live in a one | Little yard | Which part everybody | Think dem better off

A-/ A- / D- / E-  
than de other | [pause] An de only thing mi could a do |

A- / A- / D- / E- / E-  
Fi mek dem know dat mi nah | Skin up | When de

A - /A- /D- /E-  
area ready fi erupt

Mi use to live in a one  
Little yard  
Which part everybody  
Think dem better off than de other  
An de only thing mi could a do  
Fi mek dem know dat mi nah  
Skin up  
When de area ready fi erupt

A few lines down, the listener continues to be surprised by the articulation of certain words. In the line 'I got some wicked toughts', the vocal extension of the words 'wicked toughts' contrasts with the pronunciation of the previous and following words. With the prolongation of these words, 'wicked toughts' is recited over a full musical bar. In the preceding lines, however, more than one poetic line

is recited over a single musical bar. These differences in the voiced text have audible consequences. Their contrast is used to bring expressive effect into the recording. In the first few lines of the poem, we learn that the narrator is a man on the verge of nervous explosion. He has some dangerous thoughts. In order to suggest the menace behind his ‘wicked thoughts’, the poet extends the pronunciation of these two words. This particular way of voicing the text focuses attention on these two words, making them clearly stand out. The poet thus emphasises and dramatises the narrator’s emotional status. A few lines down, the young drifter sees the old murderer who is simply passing by. Here again, the poet extends the pronunciation of ‘murderer’ in order to create a sense of threat. In the voiced text, extended pronunciation sonically expresses both the danger in the narrator’s wicked thoughts and the menacing presence of the old murderer.

After this first passage, which introduces the context of the narrator’s life, the poem goes into the details of the events that happen during the night. The harmonic progression changes in this second part. In the B section there is only one chord per bar, as opposed to one chord per beat in the previous section. Here again, the listener is surprised by the great flexibility in the poet’s voice. On his spontaneous walk, the narrator randomly ‘flash[es] de area’. He is ‘fed up’. In order to give a sense of the disillusion of this night walk, the poet again uses extended pronunciation for certain words. The word ‘flash’ is purposefully prolonged. This time, this vocalisation is not used to suggest the presence of danger. Instead, it is the gloom of this night that is meticulously conveyed through the stretching of this word. It is an aesthetic choice to bring the illusion of passing time to the audiotext. Indeed, wandering through the night without any precise

goal can feel like a never-ending journey. As the narrator moves from place to place just to fill the void in his life, he stops counting the hours. In such situation, time passes slowly. The night seems to go on forever. By stretching the word 'flash', the poet uses his voice to mirror a conception of time that goes beyond an expected timeframe. After wandering around for a bit, the narrator eventually ends up at the dance. The poet introduces a number of pauses in his vocal realisation of this passage. These pauses, creating blanks within the voiced text, are there to illustrate the emptiness, the void, felt in the narrator's life. Extended pronunciation is marked in bold:

D-/D-/D-/D-  
For I did fell fed up [pause]  
A-/A-/A-/A-  
An **flash** de area [pause]  
D-/D-/D-/D-  
Mi tek a walk come up yah  
A-/A-/A-/A-  
Dat when yuh tek a stock | Is a dance ah end up at

In the above passage, the same chord is played over an entire bar. Breaks in the poem's lines happen on a change of musical bar, which is also a change of chord. In order to follow this harmonic progression, the poet pauses after the poem's lines. Between the first and the second lines, for instance, the poet introduces a pause. This creates space in the voiced text. The vocalisation thus produces a suspension that mirrors the narrator's own unpredictability. Pauses create the illusion of an unplanned journey. This is a strategic choice to bring the spontaneity of *flânerie* to the audiotext.

The final part of the B section is a bit different. The harmony changes every two beats. The poet uses these faster changes to include more pauses in the voice.

These extra pauses are not suggested in the print text, which has ‘Dance crash’ and ‘an ah ready fi tracks’ in the same line. In the audiotext, however, they are separated by pauses and vocalised over two different bars. ‘Dance crash’ comes on the E- chords of one bar, and ‘an ah ready fi tracks’ on the F chords of the next one:

F/ F/ E-/ E-  
Dance **crash**

F/ F/ E7/ E7  
An ah ready fi tracks

The poet uses this new harmonic structure to organise pauses within his performance to evoke the emptiness felt in the narrator's lonely night. Moreover, these pauses allow the poet to continue to extend the pronunciation of certain words, such as 'crash' and 'tracks'. There are fewer words within each bar, which means more time to excessively prolongate certain words.

The dance then stops. The narrator is ready to leave and take the bus, ‘But last bus stop’. The clear stop after ‘but’ continues to create a sense of spontaneity in this improvised journey. The young man continues his search for another place to spend the night. In this passage, each poetic line corresponds to one musical bar. Pauses at the end of the line are again introduced in order to have one line over one bar. They continue to function as important articulatory devices that make the narrator’s drift felt in the voiced text:

A- /A- /D- /E-  
But last bus stop ... [pause]

A never have nuh taxi fare [pause]

A- /A- /D- /E-

Plus [pause] a never<sup>477</sup> did live anywhere [pause]

/A- /D- /E-

So a jus [pause] **walk** an hold mi ead | In de air ...

Pauses and extended pronunciation are nonverbal elements recycled in the final part of the poem when the narrator finally gets some rest at the public house:

A- /A- /D- /E-

Dat when a reach deh a jus satta

A- A-/D- /E-

An **fall asleep** [pause] for<sup>478</sup>

A- /A- /D- /E-

I did **feel well weak** [pause]

The narrator's exhaustion is vocally conveyed. The stretching of the words 'fall' and 'asleep' expresses a drained body that can barely talk or move. The slowing down of the narrative pace brought about by the prolongation of these words, combined with pauses, is in sharp contrast with the next lines. As he explains to his mate Trainer what woke him up, the poet speeds up his voice:

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<sup>477</sup> The recoding uses the word 'jus' instead of 'never'.

<sup>478</sup> Here again, there is a different between the printed text and the performance of this printed text. 'For' becomes 'because' in the recording.

A- /A- /D- /E-

YUH Know what wake mi up Trainer?

A- /A- /D- /E-

Is a man come deh ina de early morning

A- /A- /D- /E-

Im must did know is a human sit down deh | A ketch a nap yet im

A- /A- /D- /E-

dash a bucket a jase water | Pon mi without saying sorry at dat

The above transcription of the voiced text in its musical context changes the layout of the written text. As opposed to the previous passage, where only one or two words were pronounced over the length of a musical beat, here many words are squeezed within a single beat. In changing the number of words per beat, the poet speeds up or slows down the declamation of his text. Here, many words are pronounced within a beat, which increases the pace of the poet's voice. It is the first time that the listener is confronted with this faster speed. These variations in the pace of the voice are made particularly audible as the music continues to be played at a regular tempo. Visually, the poem is also more compact here, as this passage has longer lines. This layout hints at a shift of pace suggesting anger. After being treated like dirt, the narrator is furious. In order to convey this feeling, the poet's voice rushes rather than slows down, as has been seen up to now. The vocalisation of the rest of the incident returns to a slower pace. Visually, it also goes back to using smaller lines. Pauses and word extensions are reintroduced. After calming down, the young man decides to 'let im guh'. He nonetheless has some deadly thoughts:

A- /A- /D- /E-  
An a si a **whole heap a blood**

A- /A- /D- /E-  
**Circle roun im** [pause]

A- /A- /D- /E-  
An let im guh [pause] | Siddung

A- /A- /D- /E-  
[pause] an **laugh**

Here, certain words are prolonged, but not to suggest exhaustion or drift.

Instead, mirroring the already discussed ‘wicked thoughts’ and ‘old murderer’ in the first lines of the poem, the vocalisation of these words expresses anger, hate and danger.

Above, I looked at how the poet animates the narration of his text with articulatory parameters. I continue to analyse the dramatic dimension of the audiotext by looking at Smith’s vocal realisation of the encounters that structure the narration and his use of nonverbal elements to slip into the skins of their characters. Theatricality is found in his manipulation of the voice to mark the different characters.

In the first encounter, between the old man and the teenager, the poet creates an audible co-presence. The narrator hears the old man laugh and say:

Kiss mi ass  
A goen help yuh Fi reach home  
Before it dark

As already mentioned, the written text does not use any signs to indicate direct speech. In the voiced text, however, the poet clearly marks this shift by using a voice that vibrates like an old man’s. The poet embodies this character in the same way that an actor would the character of a play. The poet plays the old man. After

he grabs the boy by the waist, this trembling voice suddenly changes. The poet now uses a voice that conveys an authoritative and masculine figure. To do so, he uses a deeper tone. ‘Tone’ in this context refers to the sound of a voice, created by the speaker’s inflection of words. It can also be used without any reference to sound to talk about a speaker’s attitude, such as sadness, joy, fear. Here ‘tone’ is used in relation to the sound of the voice and is understood as a paralinguistic feature of the poet’s voice used for expressive reasons. In this case, the deeper tone is combined with a louder volume. It is by using these in conjunction that the poet establishes the old man’s authoritative position. The sound of this authoritative position is in sharp contrast with the trembling voice heard in the first line of this interaction. It is also in sharp contrast with the voice of the 14-year-old boy that comes right after. In order to suggest his younger age, the poet performs this boy with a higher voice. This higher tone of voice also conveys the teenager’s position of subordination. In contrast to the deep and masculine voice, in which authority is heard, this higher voice carries a sense of fragility. Interpretations of tone may vary, as tones are not attached to fixed connotations. As Fernando Poyatos notes, ‘a *low* pitch level is often “associated with affection, boredom, fear, incredulity or disappointment [...] and *high* level with cheerfulness, joy, alarm, surprise, annoyance, anger’.<sup>479</sup> Similarly, Martina Pfeiler claims that a lower pitch may express “emotions such as sadness, seriousness, or sincerity,”

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<sup>479</sup> Fernando Poyatos, *Paralanguage: A linguistic and Interdisciplinary Approach to Interactive Speech and Sound* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1993), p. 186. Poyatos takes these *attitudinal functions* of tone level from linguistics studies, such as, for instance, Joel Davitz, ‘The Communication of Feelings by Content-Free Speech’, *Journal of Communication*, 9 (1964), pp. 6-13 ; Klaus Scherer and J.S. Oshinsky, ‘Cue Utilization in Emotion Attributions from Auditory Stimuli’, *Motivation and Emotion*, 1 (1977), pp. 331-346.

while a higher pitch can express emotional states or attitudes such as “hysteria, insecurity, or angst, to name just a few”<sup>480</sup>. These various connotations underline the flexibility in interpretation of nonverbal instruments. Leaving aside the various possibilities of interpretation, it is still clear that changes of tone in the poet’s voice are deliberately used for expressive reasons. Before the boy can even open his mouth, the man, in his strict and firm voice, tells him that no one gave him permission to talk. In their exchange of words, pauses, repetitions and hesitations in the final line express the boy’s fear and panic. Here again, the organisation of the written text does not correspond to the performance. In the example below, the first transcription shows the placement of words over the music and the second transcription is the one found in the written version.

A-/A-/D- /E-

A who give yuh permission

/A- /D- /E-

Fi talk | How old yuh be<sup>481</sup> fi stay out | A yuh yard till after dark

/A- /D-

[pause] Boy im sey| Mi

/E-

... mi a ... fourteen sah

A who give yuh permission

Fi talk

How old yuh be fi stay out

A yuh yard till after dark

Boy im sey

Mi... mi a ... fourteen sah

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<sup>480</sup> Martina Pfeiler, *Sounds of Poetry: Contemporary American Performance Poets* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2003), p. 66.

<sup>481</sup> In the recording, ‘be’ is changed into ‘is’.

Whereas ‘Fi talk’ is a line on its own, the voice, following the passage’s semantic meaning, recites this line directly after the previous one, without a break in between. It is only after ‘talk’ that the performance includes a pause. This is also true of the next two lines. The break between ‘stay out’ and ‘A yuh’ found in the written text is not voiced in the audiotext. These lines are recited over one musical bar. Having already experienced the old man’s cruelty, the teenager anticipates another violent reaction. To the old man’s question, he apprehensively reveals his age. His fear is transmitted through pauses and hesitations. In a voice that trembles, he reluctantly tells the older man that he is only 14 years old.

Then comes the ‘jase’ episode. The poet continues to play with the different features of his voice to mark the introduction of new characters in the narration. As opposed to the previous interaction, between the old man and the teenager, here the narrator is directly involved. This encounter has no verbal exchange, but it does introduce an imaginary angel and an imaginary devil. This becomes a new opportunity to act and to slip into the skins of more characters. This angel and devil sit on the narrator’s shoulders, respectively representing his good and evil sides:

A- /A- /D- /E-  
An sametime a hear something sey [pause] | Nuh juck im

A- /A- /D- E-  
And a next thing |Sey [pause] |Juck im ina im neck | Mek im run an fret

Two distinctive voices are used to show the narrator’s conflicting responses to having been treated like a dirty cockroach. On the one hand, a calming voice is used to suggest the angel’s conciliatory and pacifist nature. The stutter in the word ‘nuh’ expresses the attitude of the angel, which tries to calm down the situation.

The devil's bad temper is voiced completely differently. As opposed to the slow pace, employed to bring calmness and reason, a fast speed is now used, to express rage and vengeance. In the last line of the transcription above, many words are squeezed within a single bar, making the voice's pace increase. Throughout this passage, the differences of the voice's speed have a communicative function. Whereas slowing down the voice can suggest 'self-assurance, dominance, or uncertainty', a faster voice, on the other hand, can suggest 'gaiety, anger, impatience or haste'.<sup>482</sup> The interpretation depends on the context of the poetic discourse. 'Juck im run ina im neck / Mek im run an fret' is recited much faster than the previous lines. Shocked and upset by his unjustified treatment, the young man finally sits down and frenetically starts to laugh. In a voice full of disdain and contempt, he prefers to curse, rather than physically fight back: 'But look pon yuh to rass'. The pronunciation of 'rass', a short form of the catch-all obscenity 'rass cloth', is again extended.<sup>483</sup> It is used to express his overall derision. The listener hears what is not said. Behind this extended word, the narrator means: 'Who do you think you are to treat me like a non-human?' This implied comment brings back the issue of a society whose members have lost respect for one another and continue to function on socially and economically unstable ground. This implied question goes back to this dysfunctional society.

The encounter with the second cleaner brings direct speech into the narration. The anger of the previous scene heard in the narrator's voice is now replaced by a voice expressing dominance. In order to mirror the cleaner's dominant position,

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<sup>482</sup> Novak, p. 93.

<sup>483</sup> As already explained, 'rass-clate' (rass cloth) is 'an obscene expletive' that means 'a used sanitary napkin' (Allsopp, p. 466).

the poet plays with the volume of his voice: the order to leave is voiced slightly louder. The narrator goes without saying a word. As in the first lines of the poem, he walks away to calm down and turn his back on the omnipresence of violence. Walking away is also used as a survival strategy, to avoid getting dragged into this concrete jungle. As mentioned above, the final lines of the poem bring a sense of circularity, of endless continuity, into the narrative structure. This is the only passage where the punctuation of the text is reflected in the audiotext. Suspension points in the last two lines of the poem are translated as pauses between words in the performance. Yet a comparison of the two versions shows some discrepancies. In the written text, 'so' appears only once, as opposed to twice in the recording. Moreover, the suspension points after the first 'a' are not vocally expressed by pauses: 'a' is directly followed by 'jus', as the transcription below illustrates. The first transcription corresponds to the written text version, and the second one to the recording:

So...a...jus...a jus...  
So...so...a jus...a jus...

The layout and the punctuation are there only to suggest a particular vocal realisation. They are not an accurate transcription of this performed vocalisation.

To conclude, this chapter has identified the influence of a theatrical tradition in the practice of dub poetry. Despite the fact that many dub poets have received theatrical training, no previous academic study has looked at the result of such training on their artistic practice. I have responded to this lack by unpacking a theatrical dimension in two versions of Michael Smith's poem 'Trainer'. I looked at a theatrical dimension, discussed under the term 'theatricality', in both the

written text and the studio recording. ‘Theatricality’ was first discussed in relation to the writing process. It is an element of this poetry that can be found in the narrative structure itself. I used the poem’s different encounters and the textual voices that they create as a key element of the text’s theatricality. Indeed, I argue that they offer the possibility to act, to perform, to play out the poem off the page. Moving to the performed version, and more precisely to the audiotext, I analysed how the poet uses these different opportunities to act out the text. To do so, I focused on paralinguistic features of the poet’s voice to continue my analysis of theatricality. In the artistic practice of dub poetry, the expressive styles of different poets have made a generic understanding of the role and place of theatre in the tradition quite difficult to articulate. All of these poets have distinctive styles that display different relationships to theatre. Yet within this broad variety of styles, it is possible—and necessary—to closely read poems in order to identify key characteristics that show artistic involvement with theatre. The recognition of a theatrical dimension tends to be shadowed by an understanding of the performance as a product uniquely of oral tradition. A critical approach to the role and place of theatre is an excellent way to challenge such oversimplified conclusions. The above discussion illustrates one artistic layer within the vast range of influences that made creative innovations in dub poetry possible. Dub poetry is the result of complex histories. It is ‘full of connective experience, linguistic skill and journeying thought’.<sup>484</sup> An analysis of the theatricality of both the textual voices and the voiced text identifies an important artistic layer in these

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<sup>484</sup> Vitterato, p. 249.

complex histories that points towards further exploration.

## Conclusion

This work has opened possibilities for the development of different modes of being, seeing, understanding. Its detailed analysis of dub poetry has reconfigured and transformed the limits of existing interpretations. While previous criticism has discussed the poetry's specificities as representations of '*pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition*', this work recognises and valorises the intersections and pluralities that have arisen within the diasporic framework of the black Atlantic.<sup>485</sup> Through an in-depth study of its history, form and poetics, this thesis has explored dub poetry's artistic innovation, generated by cultural encounters in the black Atlantic. It has offered alternative readings in order to challenge analyses grounded in ethnic essentialism. I have used dub poetry to illustrate how 'received models of race, identity and belonging begin to break down' in a popular cultural form, a poetry of everyday life that developed through alternative associations.<sup>486</sup> Indeed, the cultural, historical and political contexts that made the emergence of this cultural practice possible exemplify more subtle models of social possibilities. This work is therefore an appreciation of and a call for more-pluralistic views of cultural formation.

As Alpha Abebe rightly notes, there is a tendency to assume that diasporic artists, who often come from racialised communities, have a connection to 'elsewhere':

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<sup>485</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>486</sup> John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2004), p. 16.

This representation as the ‘other’ can follow them through their artistic practice, including expectations that they will communicate a distinct (and/or essentialised) narrative, image or aesthetic through their work. These expectations can come from a commercial market thirsty for exotic art, from gatekeepers within diasporic communities policing the boundaries of cultural authenticity, or from the artists themselves as they negotiate their own relationships to their heritage and homelands.<sup>487</sup>

By looking at London as the context of its emergence, I connected the history of dub poetry to the transnationalism that defines its local environment. My understanding of such transculturalism in European cities uses a careful articulation of the creative power of diasporic communities in order to move away from the artificial boundaries of cultural essentialism: my new mode of analysis bypasses the idea that diasporic artists are bearers and preservers of culture from ‘elsewhere’.

One aim of literary criticism is to develop modes of analysis accurately tuned to the particularities of the case under examination. Scholars must find appropriate relationships between ‘what we study and how we study it’.<sup>488</sup> This need for new models of interpretation in the study of dub poetry is in line with a current desire to approach culture from interdisciplinary and internationalist angles. As the editors of *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture* note:

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<sup>487</sup> Alpha Abebe, ‘Performing Diaspora’, in *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*, ed. Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 55-62 (pp. 57-58).

<sup>488</sup> John McLeod, ‘Introduction’, in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. John McLeod (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2007), pp. 1-18 (p. 9).

The idea of locating the study of culture exclusively in the context of national and disciplinary constellations is surely losing plausibility in a world which is itself increasingly characterised by cultural exchange, globalisation, transnationalisation and interdependence.<sup>489</sup>

Yet academic attention to dub poetry continues to develop outside the margins of these characteristics. Dub poetry is rarely considered from the perspective of cultural exchange, globalisation, transnationalisation and interdependence. In work by everyone from poets to critics, dub poetry is accompanied by a strong affirmation of a Jamaican identity, influencing its reception with a specific narrative. It is true that the valorisation of a rooted identity needs to be understood as a response to the poetry's historical context. As Winston James explains, for black migrants of the postcolonial period, the affirmation of 'a new identity [was] forged in the crucible of racist Britain'.<sup>490</sup> Today, criticism becomes highly problematic when the assertion of this new belonging, here grounded in a Jamaican identity, shadows the pluralities and intersections of its local context of emergence. I believe that the difficult move of shifting interpretations from national to outer-national perspectives is governed by what Edward Said called 'conditions of acceptance' on the one hand and conditions of 'resistances' on the other. He explained that a set of conditions can facilitate or complicate the

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<sup>489</sup> Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning, 'Travelling Concepts as a Model for the Study of Culture', in *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture*, ed. Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 1-23 (p. 1).

<sup>490</sup> Winston James, 'Migration, Racism, and Identity Formation: The Caribbean Experience in Britain', in *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain*, ed. Winston James and Clive Harris (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 231-287 (p. 254). Many of my interviewees confirmed this sense of origin in and belonging to a culturally distinct Jamaican community. The strong feeling of a black Caribbean identity in both readers and poets shapes a specific reception of the poetry.

transfer of a theory or idea—such as a mode of analysis, an interpretative framework—across time and space. These conditions ‘confront the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be’ to the new area of study.<sup>491</sup> Conversely, a set of conditions can be a constraint and make the adoption of a new reading framework difficult. In both cases, the alternative approaches that can be used depend on their acceptance or resistance by the case study’s critical environment. In criticism of dub poetry, a set of resistances continues to short-circuit the recognition of this poetic practice as a literary product of transnational and diasporic encounters forged by the black Atlantic. Despite the development of globalised, transnational and international perspectives in contemporary academic studies, old discourses of racial, ethnic and national differences remain the common frame of reference for the articulation this poetry’s analytical concepts. In response to the lack of appropriate discussion, this thesis has offered a more complex framework of analysis, shaped by the realities of dub poetry’s cultural context.

The term ‘diaspora’ has been widely used across a variety of disciplines. ‘In postcolonial studies, [it] can appear both as naming a *geographical* phenomenon—the traversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group—as well as a *theoretical* concept: a way of thinking, or of representing the world’.<sup>492</sup> This double perspective offers precious alternatives to ideas of rooted identity and

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<sup>491</sup> [...] there is a set of conditions-call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances-which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be’ (Said, ‘Traveling Theory’, p. 227).

<sup>492</sup> James Procter, ‘Diaspora’, in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. John McLeod (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 151-158 (p. 151).

belonging that continue to interpret dub poetry as uniquely Jamaican. As Paul Gilroy explains:

Diaspora is a concept that problematises the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging. It disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness. It destroys the naïve invocation of common memory as the basis of particularity in a similar fashion by drawing attention to the contingent political dynamics of commemoration.<sup>493</sup>

With this unrooted belonging, diaspora also offers the possibility to recognise elements of identification outside the time and space of a national frame. It carries connections and continuity throughout a massive dislocation of peoples, whether enslaved or emancipated, which continue to shape the emergence of new cultural products. In the harsh history of colonial and imperial domination, the concept of diaspora connects past cultural practices to contemporary forms of expression. It engenders the discussion of resurgence and the recognition of themes, claims and revindications, codes and modes of expression that are recycled, responded to and reused at different times and in different places in diasporic trajectories. While recognising the role and place of Jamaican culture in dub poetry, my discussion has explored key artistic features that resonate from past connections. I have presented dub poetry as a diasporic product emerging from dense intertextual and interperformative artistic webs spun across the black Atlantic. By re-placing the poetry within this complex framework, I have reconstructed artistic,

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<sup>493</sup> Gilroy, *Against Race*, p. 123.

historical and intellectual links that made possible the development of this poetry.

I have not approached dub poetry as an isolated phenomenon. Instead, while carefully unpacking its specificities, I have shown how its artistic development has been intimately connected with other literary practices. As criticism of dub poetry tends to ‘forget’ such historical and intellectual connections, the reconstruction of this web is crucial in recognising the poetry’s rich dialogues with other artistic traditions. Indeed, Rob Partridge’s quote at the beginning of chapter 2 is a reminder of the lack of recognition of this background. Demonstrating a short-sighted perspective, he said that ‘with no literary precedents to fall back on, Linton was forced to innovate form and language to fit the demands of his subject matter’.<sup>494</sup> In fact, in unpacking a complex cultural environment, I have identified a multiplicity of artistic dialogues as the point of emergence of this particular poetic style. Neglecting the presence of other traditions in the poetry’s history is a tendency that, as Gilroy explains, mirrors an incapability ‘to have blacks perceived as agents, as people with cognitive capacities and even with an intellectual history – attributes denied by modern racism’.<sup>495</sup> This study responds to this dangerous drift by reconstructing dub poetry’s cultural integrity.

In resituating dub poetry within its intertextual and interperformative complexity, this thesis has also offered the opportunity to re-evaluate its artistic elements through the lens of diasporic creativity. Indeed, each chapter has made visible the relationship of moments of inventiveness to transnational and diasporic encounters. In other words, I have used the transformative potential of a diasporic

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<sup>494</sup> Sleeve notes on LKJ’s album *Reggae Greats*.

<sup>495</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 6.

space's cultural flows to interpret the dynamic moment of inventiveness beyond pre-given and normative categories. James Clifford's well-known essay 'Diasporas' has insightful tools for understanding such moments through the mechanisms of cultural formation, transformation and transmission. The essay explains that in the experience of displacement, diasporic cultures go through a variety of processes that 'reject, replace, or marginalize' certain elements.<sup>496</sup> As the author notes, 'diaspora cultures work to maintain community, selectively preserving and recovering traditions, "customizing" and "versioning" them in novel, hybrid, and often antagonistic situations'.<sup>497</sup> Some of these selections are conscious, while others are not. Such forms of cultural transmission carry within themselves a political agency. Customising and versioning showed a desire to bring different ways of being into the notion of Britishness. Quoting Clifford again:

[This] black diaspora culture [...] is concerned to struggle for different ways to be "British"—ways to stay and be different, to be British *and something else* complexly related to Africa and the Americas, to shared histories of enslavement, racist subordination, cultural survival, hybridization, resistance, and political rebellion. Thus the term *diaspora* is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement.<sup>498</sup>

This thesis's close readings have discussed poetic innovations as ways that dub poets have critically preserved, creatively customised and selectively remembered artistic elements of cultural practices that circulate within the outer-national

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<sup>496</sup> Clifford, 'Diasporas', p. 302.

<sup>497</sup> Clifford, 'Diasporas', p. 317.

<sup>498</sup> Clifford, 'Diasporas', p. 308.

space of the black Atlantic. Through the lens of customising and versioning, each chapter analysed a poet's creativity in key artistic features as more than the result of pure innovation. Indeed, it is often the case that an opposition between new and old limits a recognition of creativity. This backwards reading, in which innovation is simply a break from the past, implies a sense of progress that is symptomatic of modernity. For Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold, 'The polarity between novelty and convention, or between the innovative dynamic of the present and the traditionalism of the past, [...] has long formed such a powerful undercurrent to the discourses of modernity'.<sup>499</sup> Although the term 'creativity' implies the ability to do something that has not been done before, something new and original, problems arise when novelty's main or only 'significance [is] placed on breaking traditions and the construction of radically new forms'.<sup>500</sup> In such cases, the appreciation of creativity is limited by an exclusive valorisation of pure innovation, completely ignoring all forms of recuperation, recycling, transforming, customising and versioning. As discussed above, the mechanisms of cultural transmission that govern diasporic contexts offer alternative perspectives. This thesis has carefully designed interpretative frameworks in order to read the selected artistic elements through these various mechanisms. For this task, Stuart Hall's landmark 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' is another important essay offering critical tools to approach innovations and cultural formation in diasporic contexts. His analysis of cultural identity—more precisely, that of a Caribbean

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<sup>499</sup> Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold, 'Creativity and Cultural Improvisation: An Introduction', in *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, ed. Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 1-25 (p. 2).

<sup>500</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Forward', in *Cultural Expression, Creativity and Innovation*, ed. Helmut Anheier and Yudhishtir Raj Isar (London: Sage, 2010), pp. ix-xiii (p. ix).

community living in the UK—discusses the tension between difference and similarity in the formation, transformation and transmission of culture.<sup>501</sup> He explains that in a diaspora context, the expression of cultural forms is determined not by the idea of a return home but rather through and with the presence of difference. These cultures are thus negotiations between recognised elements on the one hand and new features on the other:

As well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’.<sup>502</sup>

Diaspora cultures have no mechanism to keep the essence or purity of the so-called original culture from ‘home’. They are characterised by the presence of both similarities to and differences from that culture. The coexistence of these two dimensions opens an important door to a conception of creativity and innovation. It proposes an interpretative system based on an investigation of the familiar and the unfamiliar elements. In this vein, my discussion of dub poetry has showed how poets find their creative place while travelling between these two dimensions: new modes of expression emerge between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In this view, creativity ‘must comprise both the unexpected and the recognizable, both newness and anticipation’.<sup>503</sup> In the light of Hall’s explanation of cultural

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<sup>501</sup> For Hall, ‘Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as “one people”, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history’ (Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 223).

<sup>502</sup> Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 225.

<sup>503</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, ‘Performing the World: Agency, Anticipation and Creativity’, in *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, ed. Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 193-206 (p. 200).

transmission, poetic creativity can also be interpreted along the ‘vector of similarity and continuity’ as well as the ‘vector of difference and rupture’.<sup>504</sup> As these two vectors give rise to the repetition and recycling of non-new elements, they allow the art of the dub poets to be discussed with a focus on the variety of their artistic practices that continue to be underanalysed and underappreciated.

In this journey beyond predefined interpretations, it is important to remember that my ‘position of *enunciation*’ is London.<sup>505</sup> I have used the transcultural traffic of this city, selected as my site of investigation, to enable and energise my discussion of dub poetry across national borders. As this dissertation’s chapters have shown, London has long functioned as an important place of ‘dissident thought, where intellectuals and radicals from colonized countries created interdiscursive modes of resistance through their interaction’.<sup>506</sup> Elleke Boehmer notes that ‘London, pullulating with secularist, anarchist, socialist, avant-garde, and freethinking circles [...] thus formed an important meeting ground for Indian, Irish, African, and Caribbean freedom movements’.<sup>507</sup> My reconstruction of dub poetry’s local cultural context highlighted the presence of these postcolonial oppositional elements of the diasporic space.

This analysis was articulated and written in a European context and addresses literature from a Caribbean tradition. As Paula Burnett reminds us in her introduction to *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, Caribbean

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<sup>504</sup> Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 226.

<sup>505</sup> Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 222.

<sup>506</sup> Mcleod, *Postcolonial London*, p. 5.

<sup>507</sup> Mcleod, *Postcolonial London*, p. 5, quoting Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 20.

literature is the expression of a particular people's experience. It is 'international in a special sense, both because it is a unique cultural hybrid, and because the Caribbean experience is being lived and explored artistically in Europe and North America as well as in the Caribbean region itself'.<sup>508</sup> While it is important to keep in mind that Caribbean literature is not defined by geographical borders, the recognition of its positionality has real consequences for the perception—and therefore affects the reception, interpretation and discussion—of dub poetry. Indeed, if creativity is 'a way in which *perceived* newness enters the world', the position of enunciation influences not only the contours of my academic discourse but also my approach to the poetry's moments of innovation.<sup>509</sup> Although placed within a diasporic framework, this thesis moves away from generic discussions of dub poetry by speaking from an enunciation point, which has specificities. In so doing, it responds to the unheralded positionality in the famous lines of LKJ's 'It Dread Inna Ingla':

African  
Asian  
West Indian  
an Black British  
stand firm inna Ingla  
inna disya time yah  
for noh mattah wat dey say,  
come wat may,  
we are here to stay  
inna Ingland

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<sup>508</sup> Burnett ed., *Caribbean Verse in English*, p. xxiii.

<sup>509</sup> This phrase is used in reference to Salman Rushdie's: 'Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it' (Salman Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), pp. 393-414 (p. 394)). Homi K. Bhabha recycles this expression for the title of a chapter in *The Location of Culture* (Homi K. Bhabha, 'How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 212-235).

inna disya time yah...<sup>510</sup>

This journey into the poetics of dub poetry is only one possible version of looking at this perceived newness from a certain time and place and considering the particular forms of social interactions of a specific position of enunciation.

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<sup>510</sup> Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, p. 23.

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